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Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal, written by Olive Senior

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Olive Senior

Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal.

Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2014. xxiii + 416 pp. (Paper US\$ 40.00)

Writing a history about a whole people takes strong historical drive and determined focus, both of which happily inspired this book. Olive Senior has been studying Jamaicans in Panama for most of her career, and here she expands her scope to include other West Indians and the sweep of time from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. It is a truly monumental work, the culmination of a life of study, and as close to definitive as we are likely to ever see. Moreover, its style is graceful and engaging, so that general readers as well as specialists will enjoy and learn from it. The book does for West Indians in Panama what David McCullough and Julie Greene did for the Canal¹—it immortalizes them.

The book begins with the inauguration of the Canal in 1914, an event that marked the rise to global prominence of the United States. Celebrated by international fairs in San Francisco and Panama a year later, the opening of the Canal was overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I. Senior emphasizes the historic importance and the crucial roles played by West Indians, who migrated to Panama to make up the bulk of the workforce. They labored, suffered, and died (as implied by the book's title) by the tens of thousands and helped shape the course of the twentieth century. They have not, however, been appropriately recognized.

Senior then goes back to the construction of the Panama Railroad in the 1850s, which in many ways predestined the United States to its long occupation of the isthmus and West Indians to their major roles as isthmian builders. She captures the drama of that era in her own words, embellished by ample contemporary quotations and lavish illustrations. One almost cringes while reading about mosquitoes, snakes, and 100 percent humidity on the site. The railroad was a spectacular success, carrying tens of thousands of passengers to California and tons of treasure back from the Gold Rush. She also covers the gradual retreat of Britain from its predominant position in Central America.

Senior recounts the French attempt to build a canal in Panama in the 1880s, a project that ended in catastrophic failure. Ferdinand de Lesseps, architect of the Suez Canal, mistakenly assumed that he could dig a ditch across Panama as he had in Egypt and that French resources and ingenuity would overcome all

1 David McCullough, 1977, *The Path Between the Seas* (New York: Simon and Schuster); Julie Greene, 2009. *The Canal Builders* (New York: Penguin).

challenges. West Indians migrated to the isthmus in far larger numbers than in the 1850s to work on the Canal and suffered diseases, accidents, and the disappointment of their French supervisors.

The book's main course is the story of West Indians in the U.S. Canal construction project in 1904–1914. During that period their numbers swelled to perhaps two hundred thousand, principally from Jamaica and Barbados. Senior covers their recruitment on the islands, transit to Panama, incorporation into the workforce, job experience, lifestyle, eventual separation from the Canal, and much more. This is as detailed an account as exists anywhere of just how, on the backs of black workers, the United States parlayed its industrial and financial power into a tropical empire that stretched from the Philippines to Puerto Rico, strategically linked by the Panama Canal. Her focus is on the West Indians, but her conclusion that U.S. greatness was built on the labor of non-white peoples in the tropics is easily projected to many parts of the world.

The account is rounded out with chapters on the West Indian experience in Panama after the end of construction and their impact on, and often repatriation to, their islands of origin. It took several generations of West Indian descendants (today known as Afro-Panamanians) to overcome the deep hostility and rejection by native Panamanians. The historical importance of their lives, work, and legacy gains poignancy through quotations from folk literature and many oral histories. It is a moving story indeed.

Senior cites myriad sources for this book: primary and secondary works (mostly from Panama and Jamaica), novels, poetry, oral histories, and newspapers. Her purpose is to recognize and retell the diasporic experiences of hundreds of thousands of West Indians with clarity, empathy, elegance, and gratitude—not to unearth some untold story from the archives. Those of us who have toiled in these fields owe her a big thanks.

Dying to Better Themselves joins an impressive shelf of books on West Indians in Central America by scholars like Ron Harpelle, Avi Chomsky, Velma Newton, Melva Lowe de Goodin, Trevor Purcell, Bon Richardson, Lara Putnam, Roy Bryce-Laporte, Darién Davis, myself, and many others.

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