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BOOK LAUNCH: ELEVEN TESTING YEARS by REGGIE DUMAS

National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) Building, Port of Spain

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Let me begin by expressing my pleasure at having been invited to deliver a few remarks at the launch of the latest publication by my friend, the venerable Ras Dumas, a title earned, note I did not say bestowed, during the reign of the Emperor Haile Selassie the first, in Ethiopia. Reggie, I guess that makes you true nobility.

I have always held Reggie, my apologies, Ras Dumas, in high esteem as someone who has personified the integrity, the dignity and most importantly the professionalism of the ideal public servant. This book, *Eleven Testing Years*, is testimony that my appreciation is not misplaced.

I am happy that the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, was able to play a role, small as it is, in facilitating the publication of such an important work that will add to a small but hopefully important list of persons who publish their memoirs after giving, as Mr Dumas has, decades of service to Trinidad and Tobago. I wish we could do more, especially since, this labour of love, was written, as can be gleaned from the Prologue, in longhand and typed by his sister Marina, and that Ras Dumas, had to proof-read his work himself.

Writing is a lonely, and quite often unrewarding enterprise and we are grateful still to have people like Mr Dumas with dissonance and discipline for public service even long after official retirement. And he has a judgement from the Privy Council to prove it.

Mr Dumas has always been hard on the state of the public service, whether in his letters or newspaper columns and in this, his latest publication, unflattering references are made to our “noxious reputation for incompetence” in the public service. I take a little pride however, in the paragraph on Roman xxvii which states:

“As previously, I did all the work for the publications myself. Also, as before, I benefitted from the efficient service of our National Archives staff – all is not lost in the Public Service.” As Minister with responsibility for both Nalis and the National Archives, I have taken on board the advice of Mr Dumas on the importance to the Public Service to addressing the country’s problems and the importance of the National Archives. I want to give you the assurance that we are working to make the Public Service the kind of institution of which you can again be proud. We are a long way from there, but appreciation like yours, which you expressed when I last saw you in the National Archives building, and which you have now put in print, will go a long way in motivating all our public servants.

Mr Dumas, has a reputation for not mincing words and this book remains true to that reputation, although I must admit to being confounded by some of the expressions used in the publication. I read a lot, but had never come across the expression a “come-hither lady” which did not carry the benefit of a post-script. I suspect I will also have to seek a private audience to gain a full appreciation of some of the prose on page 35 in which Mr Dumas seeks to explain the comings and goings in the social life of Addis Ababa.

This book should I suspect be of interest not just to the diplomats of the Foreign Service, public servants or citizens of Trinidad and Tobago but I believe has international appeal to anyone interested in the history of Ethiopia. It chronicles not just the career of a young

diplomat but also the rise and fall of Ras Takommen, the Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. Dumas shows how the ignoring of ethnic divisions and the mishandling of a serious public policy issue, in this case a drought and accompanied by wage distortions exposed underlying social tensions that had been simmering for centuries.

But I would leave it to you to buy a copy and read. I have long appreciated Reggie for his scholarship, his integrity and, as I have noted before, his professionalism. One thing I did not know before, was his sense of sartorial elegance, in which from page 13, I can see he took great pride. The photos display Reggie, always resplendent in the fashion of the day, from shirt-jacs to double-breasted jackets to the tails he work on being presented to the Emperor on being accredited as ambassador.

Let me quote one paragraph from the book in which Reggie outlines his predicament when called upon to eat the raw meat of a recently slain cow at a function on his arrival in Addis Ababa:

“You are a diplomat. You are sent abroad to represent your country well. In the course of that representation, you must do many unexpected things. Several pairs of eyes were now on me; the standing of newly-arrived Trinidad and Tobago – I say nothing of about my standing – was in the balance. I chewed. And swallowed. Sounds of Appreciation were heard. Personal and national honour had been saved.”

Ras Dumas, I thank you for saving our personal and national honour several times in what continues to be an illustrious career dedicated to public service. I give the assurance that the government is ready to assist as you embark, on what I already assume will be your third instalment.

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