NETTELFORD’S EULOGY
(Delivered by Professor Emeritus Edward Baugh)

We are met in ritual remembrance of Professor the Honourable Ralston Milton Nettleford, member of the Order of Merit, member of the Order of the Caribbean Community, Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica, Honorary Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford.

Having spoken those honorific words, with due formality, on behalf of the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor and the entire University of the West Indies, I can now proceed to speak about Rex, just Rex, everybody’s Rex. That name, Rex, and the wide currency of its usage are a mark of the man, since it connotes a blend of affectionate informality with style and regality. For "rex", as you know, is the Latin word for “king,” and our Rex was a prince, let alone the Kumina king.

His life will stand as a superlative example of how talent, wise nurturing and education can combine to produce the highest excellence out of circumstances of limited social and material privilege. Rex has described himself as “a typical member of the so-called 70 percent clan, the legendary 70 percent of the Jamaican population who were born to a mother who did not have the benefit of confetti.” He was raised by his mother and his maternal grandmother, both examples of that wonder of the world, the strong Jamaican woman. The boy they raised has already become a legend.

Ever since the news of his death broke, there has been an unprecedented spate of eulogies in the media, so much so that, to adapt his famous phrase about gilding the anthurium, one must now be careful not to gild the ebony. The best of those tributes should be collected in a book that will be an invaluable bequest to posterity.

Two Saturdays ago my wife was reading one of the newspapers, when I heard her give out, “Boy, every puss, dog and fowl have something to say about Rex!” It occurs to me that, with those words – “puss,” “dog” and “fowl” – she spoke a deeper truth than the off-hand remark might have intended; for one of Rex’s signal contributions was that he spoke up for puss, dog and fowl, and worked to make them feel that they were people too.

What else shall we remember about him? Well, to begin with, the sheer presence of the man: the easy authority, the self-assurance without arrogance, the sartorial individuality and elegance of the liberated man. Beyond the presence, though, were the extraordinary range and volume of talent and achievement. His life was many, simultaneous, mutually energizing careers. The achievement in each, separately, would have been enough to earn him a place in history. He
was scholar, educator, author, dancer, choreographer, administrator, institution builder. Which other university's Vice-Chancellor has also been a dancer, choreographer, founder and artistic director of a dance theatre company? And which other dancer-choreographer has also been head of a Trade Union Education Institute? Then there were the myriad works of voluntary public service, local, regional and international: service on boards and committees, and all the lectures and speeches he was asked to give. When he was appointed Ambassador-at-large for Jamaica, he had already, for years, been performing that function, not least through the monumental, spirit-lifting achievement of the National Dance Theatre Company.

Where did he find the time and energy to do all the things he did?
I got part of the answer when he was for a while my neighbour on College Common. I would get awake at 5.30 to get the house going and to help get my young daughters off to school. I would go downstairs, open up the house, let out the dogs and give them water. When I opened my kitchen louvres, I looked out across the intervening yard space into Rex's yard, sometimes just in time to see him getting into his car and driving off to his office. What this meant was that by the time the campus began its day at half-past-eight, Rex had got half a day's work done, written another chapter of a book, and taken phone calls from important people here and abroad. Prime Ministers and other such folk had a "hot line" to him. Note, I didn't say that he had a "hot line" to them. Anyway, I felt inadequate, but I would console myself for my own unproductiveness by observing that Rex didn't have children and didn't keep dogs.

It is a further mark of his distinction that all of this work was driven by one great purpose: to promote self-knowledge and a creative sense of self-worth in the Caribbean person, a self-confident sense of identity-in-community. This purpose was naturally informed by particular regard for the African underpinnings of Caribbean culture, while he affirmed his commitment to the idea of cultural diversity. In him the artist and the activist were one. His essentially educational mission was articulated in his many books, on dance, culture and identity. These works have ensured for him a place in the intellectual history of the Caribbean. He also developed his idea of communal "renewal and continuity" through the language of the body, dance.

A related feature of his capacity to articulate ideas was his eloquence. His mastery of English was a factor of his self-assurance as a Caribbean person. Sometimes he would run rings of words round us, but we would still go away impressed. Once, to my surprise, he asked me to look over his draft of a lecture. I told him that it was fine, but one or two of the sentences seemed too long and convoluted. He never asked me to look at any draft again. Then, speaking of his eloquence, there are his famous witty phrases and axioms, like the anthurium one I mentioned
earlier, or “Every buttu in a Benz is a buttu,” or “weapons of mass distraction.” In recent times, when anyone told him how well he was looking, he replied that it was “only the glow of the setting sun.”

This university has been Rex’s vocation. The lives of the two have been seamlessly intertwined. From the day when he entered the place as a freshman in 1953, until the day when he left us two weeks ago, he never left us, except for his two years at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, and that was only preparation for returning. It is an achievement of the institution that he is the first of its graduates to have become its Vice-Chancellor. When he was appointed to that position in 1998, having been Deputy Vice-Chancellor for the two preceding years, the transition was only too natural, since he had for years been a member of what he called “the kitchen cabinet” of successive Vice-Chancellors.

His twenty-five years as Director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies and the School of Continuing Studies, which the Department became under his aegis, enhanced his claim to being the embodiment of the regional character of the university. He was to play a key role in the establishment of certain other units of the university which have fostered its practical intervention into the life of the wider community. We think, for instance of the Trade Union Education Institute (which he headed), the Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts, the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication, the Mona School of Business, the Cultural Studies programme.

A feature of his leadership style was his accessibility, to “puss, dog and fowl;” and closely related to this were his thoughtfulness and generosity towards others, and his unreserved gratitude to all who nurtured and mentored him in his early years. A few years ago, a retired maintenance worker who had been re-hired on contract, was told, unjustly as he thought, that his services would no longer be needed. In telling his story, he said to me, “I vex, I vex, so I just go and talk to Mr Rex.” (I don’t think he realized that he was a dub poet.) That story was an eye-opener to me, even at that late stage of my knowing Rex, as to what he meant to the so-called little people.

We have heard of his financial help to young people of limited means to further their education. Many of us have experienced his meticulous kindness in sharing information. When, in his travels, he came across some article or book review which he knew would be of particular interest to you, soon enough you would receive a clipping or a photo-copy, with a note in his own hand.

As for his gratitude to persons who helped to make him, whether as benefactors, mentors or role models, he has spoken warmly of Dr Herbert Morrison, who, as Rex’s close friend Barbara Gloudon has written, was like a father to him when he was a schoolboy at Cornwall College. He
has singled out teachers like Clifford Francis at the elementary school at Bunker’s Hill, and Rupert Miller and Phillip Wright at Cornwall. Then, at the UCWI, there were Elsa Goveia, Roy Augier and John Parry. At Oxford, there was Isaiah Berlin. But perhaps the one who may be called his chief mentor and promoter was Philip Sherlock.

To his siblings, to his other relatives, to Sam, to Miss Morgan, to Miss Ruby, to his beloved NDTC family, we say, “Take courage from his strength and his example.” Tonight the music of alleluias will lift with the gentle breeze blowing across the cane-piece. As it rises, to Bunker’s Hill, to Accompong, to Blue Mountain Peak, and spreads across the Caribbean Sea, and as the spirits dance on the waves, we will hear, under the singing, the drums, the drums, the heartbeat of the people.

“Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

“Prof,” Professor, Rex: we say to you, as you were fond of saying to us at leave-taking, “Bless you!”