

Remembering C.L.R James
Norman Girvan

Prepared for Seminar on “Remembering C.L.R James”
Department of Behavioural Sciences, UWI, St Augustine
May 8, 2000

Cyril Lionel Robert James—“Nello” to his close friends, “CLR” to the rest of us--was, arguably, one of the outstanding personalities of the 20th Century. In a life that spanned nine of the Century's decades (1901-1989), he embraced most of its great social movements with passion, eloquence, and brilliant insights. His impact extended far beyond his native Trinidad and Tobago to the entire Caribbean, Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and Africa.

To some, CLR is best known for his tireless struggles against colonialism, imperialism, racism, and Stalinism; inspired by an overarching and infectious vision of the possibilities of establishing a just, humane and participatory society. Others will remember him for the scope of his knowledge and appreciation of literature and philosophy, and for his ability to illuminate their relationship to politics and the workday world. For many, he is quite simply the best writer on cricket and society that the game has ever known. No one exposed to him or his work is ever quite the same again.

My personal experience of CLR began in 1959. I was a youth of 18 years, freshly arrived on the Mona Campus of what was then the University College of the West Indies. On residence at Taylor Hall, I was surrounded by Trinbagonians, Guyanese, Bajans, Antiguan and students from the other islands. The air was vibrating to the sound of Pan and enriched with the smell of Roti—sounds and smells that were to me new, unfamiliar, even exotic.

Looking back, I can see that I was in the process of being transformed from a Jamaican nationalist into a Caribbean regionalist. The West Indies Federation had just come into existence and had become the political beacon of West Indian nationalism for those of us on Campus, where Professor Arthur Lewis had just taken office as the first West Indian Principal. Referendum, secession, and the break-up of the Federation were not even on the distant horizon—they were beyond it. In Trinidad, Dr Williams was leading a militant campaign for the return of the American base at Chaguaramas as the Federal Capital Site. In Jamaica, Norman Manley was in power. The two island leaders were engaged in a spirited debate on the structure that the new Federation would take, a debate that was echoed in the “STs” that went far into the night in the rooms and stairways of Taylor, Chancellor and Irvine Halls of Residence. (I cannot speak of Mary Seacole Hall, for male students were now allowed into its virginal precincts.)

This was the ambience in which CLR James came to deliver one in a series of Open Lectures on the West Indies organised by the University Administration. I had never heard of the man before—he might have been introduced to us a Trinidadian writer who was also Secretary of the West Indian Federal Labour Party and Editor of the PNM Newspaper, the Nation. I believe that I attended all of the Open Lectures, but I have not the slightest recollection of any of the

others, only CLR's. He spoke about "The Artist in the West Indies", and listening to him was one of those experiences that leaves its mark forever imprinted upon the mind and memory.

James brought art, literature, politics, philosophy, history, and economics together within a single unified vision of the world and of human society. "The great artist" he said, "is universal because he is national" - rooted in his society and reflecting and relating to the social forces of his time and place. Speaking at a time when to be a West Indian artist was almost synonymous with being in exile, he asserted that the development of West Indian artists would be in direct proportion to their relevance and relationship to West Indian society. That society therefore has an interest in giving them support and livelihood within the region.

It was, however, not only what James said but perhaps even more the way in which he said it, which left the indelible impression. He spoke with knowledge, feeling, authority, fluency, and poetry. The words seemed to flow like a great river from the mountain to the sea, sometimes changing direction and even speed, sometimes digressing, but never ceasing in its forward motion, never uncertain about where it was coming from, and always seemingly confident that it was headed towards some glorious rendezvous with history. For me, this first impression will always sum up the spirit and impact of C.L.R. James.

James at the time was 58 years old. He had already lived about three lives: as a literary critic and sportswriter in his native Trinidad in the 1920's, as sportswriter turned socialist and anti-imperialist writer and activist in Britain in the 1930's; as Marxist revolutionary scholar and organizer in the U.S.A. in the 1940's and 1950's. He was then in the midst of his fourth life: political writer and agitator in Trinidad.

A fifth life, that of teacher and political mentor to several generations of Caribbean students, was to assume more and more importance after the break with Williams over Chaguaramas and Federation. I remember when I went to London to study in 1962, a Jamaican law student called Richard Small and I formed a study group of West Indian students which met every Friday night at James' house at No. 20 Staverton Road in North London, and sat - often literally- at the feet of the revolutionary Marxist master. Among the people attending at one time or another were Walter Rodney, Orlando Patterson, Margaret Carter Hope, Joan (then Rainford) and Stanley French, Adolph Edwards, John Maxwell the sociologist, Ken Ramchand, and Walton Look-Lai, currently lecturing in History on this Campus. Richard Small, incidentally, has gone on to become one of Jamaica's most prominent and highly respected human rights advocates.

James' prescribed texts ranged from the Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, to the chapter in Das Kapital on "The Working Day", and the booklet on the Hungarian revolt of 1956 produced by James and his associates (Facing Reality); and many others. He gave us his unique interpretation of the subtleties of Hegel, Heidegger, and Wilson Harris. At a subsequent stage we ourselves prepared papers: my own thinking on Caribbean economic thought was first stimulated by a paper I wrote for this group. Walter Rodney further honed his views about the relationship between Marxism and democracy in a review of Facing Reality. And Adolph Edwards' booklet on Marcus Garvey, one of the first of its kind, was a direct result of his paper for that group.

CLR left London in 1965 to cover the Australian cricket tour of the West Indies for a British newspaper. While in Trinidad he was placed under house arrest by Dr Williams' Government during a state of emergency called in response to labour unrest in the oil belt. Back in London, we watched these events with consternation, and campaigned for CLR's release. After his release, James formed the Workers and Farmers Party with George Weekes and Stephen Maharaj. James hoped that this would become mass party conforming to his revolutionary principles and uniting the two main ethnic groups and classes in Trinidad and Tobago.

I came to Trinidad as a young lecturer in economics in 1966 and saw James several times during my six-month stay. In fact, I got into political hot water with the Williams Administration when it was rumoured that the Government would cancel my work permit. It was thought that this was due to my association with CLR.

But my 1966 experience of CLR was to some degree, the loss of illusion. The Trinidadian masses did not respond to James and his political allies. I remember attending a rally at Woodford Square where James and George Weekes and others spoke. I do not believe there were 50 people present. Some people were laughing openly at "the old man". In the ensuing election, all of the WFP's candidates including James lost their deposits.

There was also a personal aspect. I once went to visit James where he was staying with the family of a Party member in St Augustine. He was living in near poverty. He was dependent on people who did not seem to accord him the respect that he deserved. I did not like to see James in that condition. The whole experience made me very uncomfortable.

History has a strange way of working itself out. Looking back, I believe the crushing defeat of the WFP in the 1966 election was probably a blessing in disguise for CLR. I really don't believe that CLR would have been successful in government. He was too iconoclastic and in many respects uncompromising, for that. James was a great thinker, teacher, inspirer, and organiser. But I am not sure he would have made a good administrator. I cannot imagine him as a Prime Minister or a Minister of Government. He would almost certainly have fallen out with his political allies within a short time. In fact, his political alliance did not outlast electoral defeat. Neither would it, in all likelihood, have survived an electoral victory.

The loss of 1966 and his return to the UK were to propel CLR firmly into his life as teacher and mentor. The 1960's was the decade of the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, and Black Power. There was a rediscovery of James' work of the 1930's, such as The Black Jacobins and The History of the Negro Revolt. Unlike many others whose work was subsequently rediscovered, however, James was alive and very much kicking to continually reinterpret its relevance and meaning to the present. He was now becoming the Grand Old Man of Marxist anti-Stalinism, the Black struggle, and Caribbean radicalism. He lectured tirelessly, in spite of failing health, in the United States, Britain, Europe, and the Caribbean. He taught at several universities without the unnecessary certification of a university degree. He had earned this distinction as a result of his prodigious written output, his mastery over a wide range of material normally the subject of obscurantist disciplinary specialisation, and the enormous respect and prestige that he enjoyed.

Moreover, the publication in 1963 of *Beyond a Boundary*, James's classic book on cricket, seemed to anticipate the rise of the West Indian team to dominance in international cricket--not only in statistics but also in style. The team's first black captains, Frank Worrell and Garry Sobers, were known to be men who shared James's conception of the meaning of the game to West Indian life and were in turn influenced by it. CLR's vindication was extended to the world of sport.

In 1971 I was on the Mona Campus of the UWI and a member, with George Beckford, of the Jamaican chapter of the New World Group. Gbeck and I together with Richard Small, Stanley French and Ken Ramchand from the former London study group, organized a week of symposia on James' work in Kingston, to mark CLR's 70th birthday. We thought, perhaps, that he would not around with us for much longer. But he was to confound us on that score, as he went on for another 18 years.

By this time in his life James' speeches were shorter, but, as if in compensation, the wisdom was even more crystallized. I remember him as clearly as if it were yesterday, speaking of the great cleavages in contemporary society: the cleavage between elite and masses, between manual and intellectual work, and between town and country. These cleavages, James declared, 20th Century civilization must supercede; or descend, inexorably, into barbarism. If today these issues seem as relevant as ever, it is a sign of the timelessness of the vision of C.L.R. James.

I feel strongly that no Caribbean person can regard himself as being truly educated without having at least some familiarity with the life and work of C.L.R. James. To know where you are going, as James always insisted, you must know where you are coming from. In addition, the work of James becomes a door through which one can enter an appreciation of all the great issues of the 20th Century. When I took responsibility for the graduate programme at the former Consortium Graduate School of Social Sciences, I organised, together with Professor Keith Hart, a course on the work of CLR James, which all students were required to take. It was highly successful, and the students were enormously excited by the material.

Touchingly, when James first heard of the work of the class of 1987/88 he sent them a personally autographed copy of his collection, At the Rendezvous of Victory (Allison and Busby, 1984). In return, the students sent him a copy of David Rudder's 1988 long playing album with the feature song on Haiti: "Toussaint was a mighty man, and to make matters worse he was Black!" When he died in the following year, the essays were published in a book in tribute to CLR, edited by Dr Bishnu Ragoonath, now a lecturer on this Campus. The School also chose at its motto "Beyond the Boundaries": For CLR, to strive to reach Beyond a Boundary was a principle of lifelong effort and commitment.

I hope that this Seminar will serve to stimulate further examination of James's work and its significance for us in the 21st century. To appreciate James fully he must come to life for you, be seen and heard in the flesh, so to speak. Technology now virtually makes this possible. There are in existence several audio and videotapes of James's speeches. May I suggest that you locate them and make full use of them for future generations of students.

-----0000000000000000-----