

# A Study of Young C. L. R. James and Trinidadian Context in the Early Twentieth Century

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Growing interest has been attracted to the West Indian novelist, historian, and critic, C. L. R. James since the rise of so-called “British Cultural Studies.” Many biographies of James, accordingly, are available now, in addition to his own autobiographical criticism on cricket *Beyond a Boundary* and his letters to Constance Webb. However, less attention has been paid to the environment as a whole that nurtured his unique stance to the contemporary problematics, though many critics refer to individual memories of him about his family, what he read in his school days, and cricket. Early in the twentieth century, Trinidad produced many talented intellectuals whose influence remains even today. Why did such talented thinkers appear in the same place at the same time? If Trinidad, as Eric Williams charged in his *History of the People of the Trinidad & Tobago*, was based on sugar workers and needed only sugar workers, not citizens, what was the driving force that gave rise to the limited but in some respects prominent intellectuals? The purpose of this paper is to clarify the local and historical situation of Trinidad from the turn of twenties century to 1920s in which not only James but West Indian intellectuals in general were brought up.

Towards the end of nineteenth century, there appeared new criteria which became the basis of social ranking within the black community in Trinidad. It is true that color and ethnicity was most important of them, but with the growth of the professions and the civil service, education and opportunities which education provided began to assume ever greater significance in the twentieth century. At the top of this status hierarchy were the university educated professionals, below them the more educated of the civil servants, and, still lower, the primary school teachers who had been trained by the

“student teacher” method, which was supplemented with a course in the local teachers’ training college. In 1901 two members of the new stratum of “black” primary school teachers in the Arima district of Trinidad, east of Port of Spain acquired sons who would make their mark on the world in a different profession from theirs. One was Cyril Lionel James and the other Malcom Nurse; both would achieve distinction as professional revolutionary organizers and intellectuals. The fathers of the pair were good friends. The James family was descended from the class of free colored artisans; James’s grandfather had been a respected and first black engineer on the government railroad.<sup>1</sup> Later James’s young brother, Eric would continue in the family occupational tradition and become an important railway official himself. The father of Nurse was also an exceptionally successful colored man by the standards of the colonial society of the period, for he served as an Agricultural Advisor to the government Department of Education.<sup>2</sup>

The young James and Nurse were casual friends in their boyhood. Writing many years later, James nostalgically recalled that they had together explored their rural and forested environment, tramping along the base of the Northern Range and bathing in the Arima River.<sup>3</sup> Both of them eventually attended secondary school. James was a precocious boy and won an exhibition at nine to Queen’s Royal College (henceforth referred to as Q.R.C); Nurse attended St. Mary’s College. Opportunities for secondary education had not increased very much by 1911, the year in which James and Nurse were preparing to embark on their secondary school education. Secondary education was expensive, straining the limited resources of the colored middle class and practically out of the question for the children of parents living in regions so remote from the urban centers as to make necessary the boarding of their children in town. The official scholarship was a bridge between primary and secondary school, and from the latter to a university education abroad. The government itself provided only four free places in the secondary schools, and the university scholarships for the United Kingdom numbered only three annually.<sup>4</sup>

However, quality of the secondary school instruction was, in comparison to the ordinary level in the primary schools, deemed to be extraordinarily

high. On this point there is the testimony of a leading West Indian educator who would be the first Prime Minister in Trinidad, that is, Eric Williams himself. As an alumnus of the system, he later wrote that both Q. R. C. and St. Mary's had a staff and curriculum which was the equal of the British public schools after which both were modelled. Classical literature, languages, geography, mathematics, history—even a course in West Indian history—were all taught. Besides, the fact that the colony's secondary schools were the first colonial institutions to participate in the external examinations of Oxford and Cambridge was quite important in accounting for the high level of competitive scholarship in Trinidad.<sup>5</sup> Thus identical criteria for performance were established for the local scholars, whose work was thereby ranked and locally acclaimed in an inter-Empire educational system. The Trinidad scholar did well, according to Eric Williams, who graduated from Q. R. C. and wrote later in a newspaper article dealing with the social anatomy on the island in the year of his birth:

...One of the island scholars of 1911 was placed first among 57 candidates in the British Empire in Agricultural Science ...He gained distinction in five subjects; so did four other students in the Empire, one in Ceylon, three in England. Of 83 candidates who gained distinction in history, four were from Trinidad ... At the 1910 examinations one island scholar from Queen's Royal College was placed first in the Senior Cambridge examinations throughout the Empire, whilst another from St. Mary's College topped the candidates in the entrance examination to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London.<sup>6</sup>

Another avenue of advancement for the secondary school graduate who had been unable to obtain a university scholarship was to go to the United States and attempt to work his way through a university. Malcom Nurse took this route in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> And then there was cricket. Inter-colonial cricket had been inaugurated in Trinidad in 1893, the year in which the elite Queen's Park Oval Club was organized. In 1895 a team from England had been beaten by all-Trinidad side; two years later, during the centennial celebrations of

British rule, cricket was prominent on the agenda, and in 1900 the first West Indian team visited England. Cricket clubs, and the inevitable village cricket pitch, could be found all over Trinidad. Everyone knew the game; young C. L. R. James was a cricket fanatic, and so was Learie Constantine, whose father had himself been an outstanding exponent of the game. In the 1920s Learie Constantine went to England to play in the County league for Nelson in Lancashire. He soon established a reputation as being one of the best “all-rounders” that the game had ever seen, a sportsman of legendary prowess and one of the early heralds of the phenomenal ability that West Indians were to bring to the game.

In his cricket memoirs, *Beyond a Boundary*, James provides glimpses into such facets of the period as the Puritanical code impressed on the Q. R. C. school boy, the metropolitan sophistication of a group of local intellectuals and litterateurs, and the manner in which membership in the various local cricket clubs was determined by very fine class and color distinctions. The excellence of the cricket played was a product of the sublimated class conflict which found an outlet in the keen rivalries between the clubs; also of importance was the ready, informal availability of top players for matches at every level. A self-confident, robust, uninhibited national character for which cricket provided a disciplined, formalized, means of expression took shape under the veneer of class and caste.

West Indian social conditions of the period, particularly in Trinidad, according to James, were analogous to the vigorous, pre-Victorian ethos which had produced W. G. Grace and the modern game of cricket: an England still unconquered by the Industrial Revolution, not finicky in morals, committed to enjoying life with gusto.<sup>8</sup> The parallel, if tenuous, is nevertheless fascinating. In Trinidad the lively, competitive, innovative neighborhood organizations of the urban conditions had counterparts in many areas of the countryside. Tunapuna, the native district of James, Constantine and Nurse, had been described by Dom Basil Matthews as a frontier town, intensely clannish, and united as a semi-secret organization against outsiders. The cultural background and the subconscious origins of the intense populist faith which James developed into a unique method of revolutionary

organization during his years as a sectarian radical are suggested in this portrayal, by Matthews, of the Trinidad from which he emerged:

Beneath the geographico-economic conditions of the village neighborhood, human factor was active and creative. The flight of runaway slaves and the forging or assimilation of novel kinship links (godparent relationships) in the social pattern, to say nothing of the development of folk literature, are evidence of creative activity. Nevertheless, the neighborhood, that is, the village, frequently cast or drawn into the shadow of the plantation, largely conditioned and also determined the structure, form and expression of the traditional Trinidad family and society. Just as in recent times all life and activity, even in the remotest village, point, like the roads, to the commercial towns and industrial centres; so, in the intervening hundred years, the shut-in village neighborhood was the hub and matrix of society...

Membership in a territorial group used to be a test of manhood. Initiation involved the spilling of blood of the petitioner in a war-like ceremony which has been witnessed by many people who are today [circa 1953] not above twenty-five years of age. The secret society aspect of the territorial group is nowhere as remarkable as in Tunapuna where ...the original Tunapunians hold their community secrets to this day against all corners, whether they be the law or private citizens.<sup>9</sup>

During this period Captain Cipriani seems to have made a deep impression on many youth in Trinidad, an impression which was more than political; it was emotional as well. While many members of the colored middle class, directly dependent on remaining good grace with the British authorities to maintain their standing within a tight little social structure, were leery of supporting Cipriani openly, they sympathized with his cause and gave him covert support and encouragement. When speaking at Woodford Square, Cipriani would often point rhetorically toward St. Vincent Street (the "lawyers row" of Port of Spain) and, apparently without great success, exhort its timid denizens to join in the struggle of democracy. James has written a

reminiscence of Cipriani in which several incidents are suggestive. At one time he and a friend were listening to Cipriani speak: “As Cipriani came to a pause at the end of the opening words I felt thrills running up and down my back and I looked at John: his eyes were filled with tears.” On another occasion, when in his capacity as English tutor to the French Consul in Trinidad, the latter official asked James, “If the Governor arrested Captain Cipriani, what do you think would happen?” James immediately answered, “The people will burn down the town.”<sup>10</sup>

This, then, was the curious mixture of the rustic and urban, the provincial, yet cosmopolitan environment to which schoolboys and young men born after the turn of the century would be exposed in the Trinidad of the Twenties. During the decade Malcom Nurse tried his hand at local journalism but then set off for Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and then moved on to Howard University in Washington, D. C. James taught at Q. R. C., at the Government Teacher’s College, and was also on the verge of leaving the colony by the end of the decade. Eric Williams had a series of successful scholarship competitions behind him and was about to climax his graduation from Q. R. C. by winning an Island Scholarship.

On a day in 1931 James ran into Eric Williams on a street near Q. R. C. They knew each other well, for James had been a tutor to Williams while the latter was a pupil at the secondary institution. Both had made plans to leave the colony. James had been working on a biography of Captain Cipriani and was determined to go to England to become a writer. Williams, having just won his university scholarship, had decided that conventional career pattern of the scholarship winner—law or medicine—was not for him; he was going to Oxford University and do history.<sup>11</sup> His father, who had favored a regular professional career for his son, protested, but to no avail, for after all, as the Trinidad scholar-system dryly observed during a B. B. C. interview in 1962, “It was I who had won the scholarship—not he.”

Thus the two Trinidad intellectuals set off, like many other bright, adventurous and ambitious young men from the provinces of the Empire, in search of an education, and possibly even a career, in the metropolitan country. Many had, of course, preceded them, and even more would follow.

Not all, however, went to the Mother Country; some, like Kwame Nkrumah who left the Gold Coast about three years later, or the son of a poor East Indian estate observer, Cheddi Jagan, who left British Guiana in 1936, would go to the United States. All, however, shared the status of “foreign student” in an advanced country. In both the universities and by exposure to the intellectual milieu of these countries, they found individuals and groups which instilled and encouraged nationalist aspirations which gave the impetus to the incipient colonial revolution.

The intellectual and political *Zeitgeist* which greeted James and Williams in the England of the Thirties was perhaps more strongly to the left than it had ever been before, or would become thereafter. The Western democracies were entering a period of intense political ferment and crisis associated with the Great Depression and the skirmishes, both ideological and military, between fascism, Communism, and capitalist democracy. In this highly-charged political period, the education of colonial students tended to acquire great ideological intensity and significance. But not all of the young colonials were exposed to, or gravitated toward, identical left milieu. Their status and experiences had much in common, but the theoretical and practical social knowledge which they acquired bore the differing stamps of the conflicting schools of thought within the European Left of the day. Between Keynes and Lenin, between Laski and Trotsky, there were important differences in the strategy of attaining a better future society. These were distinctions which the seriously political colonial student would at least be aware of, and toward which he might often acquire at least tentative leanings and ideological preferences. Political education in the metropolitan country was not uniform, although there was a broad common exposure to everyday British life. Cricket was everywhere cricket, but Oxford was not Bloomsbury.

In the diverging careers of James and Williams in the England of the Thirties, these differences in milieu stand in sharp contrast, partially because James was not a university student and lived chiefly in London. Another colonial intellectual who was a university student in London (studying anthropology under Professor Malinowski), Jomo Kenyatta, was a member of the same radical circle that attracted James.

James arrived in England in 1932, apparently a few months ahead of Williams. He spent three months in London and then went to live for some months with Norma and Learie Constantine in Lancashire, where he found employment for his literary skills in helping Learie write his first cricket book. Returning to London, he made his living by reporting country cricket for the *Manchester Guardian* while, as he later wrote, “I educated myself.” There was to be, however, a curious similarity in the careers of these Trinidadians in the Mother Country, and that was that though they came to learn, they stayed to teach. Constantine was an acknowledged master at cricket, James would teach them politics, Williams would teach them history; and, some years later, Rudranath Capildeo would undertake to teach them physics.

As Williams began his career at Oxford, James then just over thirty years of age, almost immediately embarked on the education of the British. He plunged into the radical haunts of London. More than a spectator, and fresh from completing *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, he began to participate by lecturing on *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* which Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press published in 1933. At the same time, he later wrote, “I was reading hard and I was already a long way towards becoming a Trotskyist.”<sup>12</sup> In the midst of the formative period in London he was invited one day to attend a speech by “a great Negro Communist” named George Padmore in Gray’s Inn Road. He was going to every meeting in those days, and the “Negro” aspect of the invitation was an added attraction. He went and found about 50 people in a small auditorium, most of them blacks. They waited for some time and then “...in stepped Malcom Nurse.” His old friend, James learned during a reunion which ran far into the night, had pursued a similar career with him since he had left Trinidad and gone to the United States. At Howard University, Nurse had shown signs of a military revolutionary temperament when he had thrown a sheaf of anti-imperialist pamphlets in the face of a visiting British Ambassador. He then entered into organizational work for the U.S. Communist Party in Harlem and took the party name of George Padmore.<sup>13</sup>

Well-educated, cultivated young black radicals like Padmore and James



were at a premium in these early days of the stirrings of black radicalism in the United States, the West Indies, and Africa. First Padmore, and later James, rose very rapidly in the hierarchy of leadership and notoriety of the various contending branches of the international Left. Compared to blacks in the United States and Africa, the West Indian colored colonials had had educational and social advantages far superior to those attained by the blacks suffering under the American caste system or under the less “enlightened” British trusteeship in Black Africa.<sup>14</sup>

This is how young Trinidadians like James, Nurse and Williams started their career as intellectuals in the British Empire. There appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century an avenue of social mobility based on the educational system which led to a growing degree of correlation, within the black community, of social status and education. The history and literature they studied, though insubstantial while in Trinidad, came to life immediately after their arrival in England, the fruit of which was to be returned to Trinidad later as independence movement.

### Notes

- 1 C. L. R. James, “Nationalist Strain.” *New Statesman*, January 18, 1958, pp. 67–8
- 2 C. L. R. James, “Notes on the Life of George Padmore.” *The Nation*, October 2, 1959.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Eric Williams, “Education of a Young Colonial.” *The P. N. M. Weekly*, August 30, 1956.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*. London: Hutchinson and Co., 1963. p. 157 and *passim*.
- 9 Dom Basil Matthews, *Crisis of the West Indian Family*. Trinidad: Government Printing Works, 1953. p. 95
- 10 C. L. R. James, “Andrew Arthur Cipriani.” *Guardian* (Independence Supplement), August 26, 1962.
- 11 C. L. R. James, “Dr. Eric Williams, P. N. M. Political Leader—A Convention

- Appraisal.” *The Nation*, March 18, 1960.
- 12 C. L. R. James, “Notes on the Life of George Padmore.” *The Nation*, October 2, 1959.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.* See also “From Tacarigua to Moscow: Padmore’s early Life,” J. R. Hooker, *Trinidad & Tobago Index*, Winter, 1966.

## 若年期のC. L. Rジェイムズ研究

——20世紀初頭トリニダード社会という文脈から——

梶原克教

C. L. R. ジェイムズに関する伝記的書物は数多く書かれているが、その多くはジェイムズの家族や学生時代に読んだ本やクリケットに関する思い出といった個人的な記憶に関するものだった。ジェイムズはたしかに傑出した批評家であったが、同時代にトリニダードという同じ場所から、エリック・ウィリアムズやマルコム・ナースといった同じような優れた知識人が輩出されている。そこで本論文は、19世紀終わりから1920年代にかけての、つまり上記知識人たちが宗主国イギリスに移る前のトリニダードの環境を総体的に捉え、そのような人材を多く輩出した社会的条件を、ジャーナリスティックな文献資料から解明してゆく。なかでも、なぜアメリカの黒人に先んじてトリニダードの黒人が世界的なアフリカニズム運動を先導したのかについて、トリニダードの教育制度に関連づけると同時に、その立地特性——田舎であると同時に都会であり、辺境であると同時に中央である——に焦点を当てて論じる。