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OBITUARIES

C. L. R. James (1901–1989)

PAUL BUHLE*

C. L. R. James's passing in London on May 31, 1989 removed one of the Caribbean's great literary pioneers, historical scholars, and political-cultural personalities. He had lived just long enough to see the appearance of his biography (by myself), and the emergence of an international scholarship about his work and legacy.

Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to a financially hard-pressed but well-educated lower-middle-class family, James grew up an unusual black intellectual prodigy. At Queen's Royal College, his interest in cricket overcame his enthusiasm for formal schooling, however, and rather than departing for further education abroad, he turned to a life of teaching, cricket correspondence, and literary activism. His intellectual circle produced two of the English-language West Indies' earliest cultural journals, *Trinidad* and *The Beacon*. Like his mostly creole collaborators, James interested himself greatly in the slum population, especially women. His noted short stories led to a novel, *Minty Alley*, written in 1927 but not published for nine years.

James had meantime left for England, ostensibly to help cricketer Learie Constantine write his autobiography, *Cricket and I*. James quickly became an outstanding cricket commentator for the *Manchester Guardian*. He was simultaneously swept up in West Indian political enthusiasm, for the first time, and wrote the pamphlet *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, reprinted as *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*. Shifting his base from Lancashire to London, James soon became enmeshed in the revived Pan-African movement and in British Trotskyism.

These causes inspired a literary output unprecedented for any Caribbean author in scope and in political argumentation. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938) transformed (or perhaps, substantially created) the field of modern West Indian and slave scholarship. *A History of the Negro Revolt* (1938) extended the discussion of black revolt across continents and up to the current day.

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World Revolution, 1917–36 (1939), then considered the “Bible of Trotskyism,” reviewed the triumph and the decline of the Bolshevik party and the Comintern.

Scarcely less important for his West Indian activity was James’s collaboration with George Padmore and others in attacking the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, and in launching the International African Service Bureau. James, who edited the bureau’s *International African Opinion* for some months, personally influenced many intellectuals destined to be important in the independence period ahead. He also worked closely, for a time, with Paul Robeson, who starred in James’s well-received 1936 theatrical drama, *Toussaint L’Overture*.

James spent the following era, 1939–53, in the United States, mostly working with and then breaking from the Trotskyist movement. His intellectual output included philosophy, literary criticism, and political interpretation, most notably the argument that black community activity could direct the North American class conflict toward a successful socialist conclusion. His private friendships—including Richard Wright and the young Kwame Nkrumah—and his continued avuncular relationship with Eric Williams kept James close to Pan-African intellectual life and to anticolonial movements.

Expelled from the United States on passport violations charges, James returned to England, where he assembled an informal West Indian following not unlike that of his African following 20 years earlier. He impressed on his listeners the importance of self-preparation for the independence period ahead. As that approached, he lectured widely in the English-speaking islands on history, culture, and politics.

Called to Trinidad by Williams, the new nation’s first prime minister, James sought to put his ideas in practice through editing *The Nation*, the weekly paper of the People’s National Movement (PNM). His political agenda, the thorough democratization of Trinidad-Tobago political and cultural life, with ultimate power in the hands of the masses, ill-suited the emerging political elite. His insistence on a program of swift regional federation and his hopes for the national Non-Aligned Movement isolated James within the PNM. He resigned his editorship and returned to England, after penning the polemical *Party Politics in the West Indies* (1962).

James’s subsequent efforts to influence Trinidadian politics brought him a handful of enthusiastic followers, in the failed Workers and Farmers party of 1966, the “New Beginnings” youth movement, and the Black Power revolt of 1970. Ironically, Williams’s non-PNM successor, A. N. R. Robison, whose government awarded James the nation’s Trinity Cross, had been one of James’s chief antagonists in earlier decades. James himself remained unreconciled, to the end, with the regional styles of postinde-

pendence government in Trinidad-Tobago and elsewhere. Other notable rebels, including Walter Rodney and Tim Hector, often expressed their sense of devotion to the lifelong effort of the region's *éminence grise* radical.

James's regional influence could be felt, in the short run at least, more in culture than politics. James had been an early enthusiast of Caribbean literature—George Lamming, Wilson Harris, and Vida Naipaul (whom he later bitterly criticized) had been among his early favorites—and of the more informal pastimes, calypso and cricket. James's *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a history of cricket and its development in the West Indies, stands as a regional classic, as well as an outstanding social history of a sport.

During his final decades, James became a Pan-African cultural *magus*, lecturing far and wide so long as his health permitted, teaching for a few years at Washington's Federal City College, and retiring at last to the third floor of the *Race Today* office in London. There, he attempted (and failed, for reasons of health) to write his memoirs. But he occasionally spoke on British television, usually on cricket. And he granted hundreds of interviews to visiting political figures and scholars. A half-dozen volumes of his selected works appeared in the later 1970s, the anthology *C. L. R. James: His Life and Work* in 1986, the biographical *C. L. R. James: The Artist as Intellectual* in 1989, and a *C. L. R. James Reader* as well as the anthological *C. L. R. James' Caribbean* are anticipated soon. A C. L. R. James Society—aimed at encouraging regional scholarship about James and providing data on continuing public interest—has recently been organized by Calaloux Press, P. O. Box 82-725, Wellesley, MA 02181. Phone (617) 237-2230.