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Quixote at the wicket

Matthew Engel is bowled a googly by Farrukh Dhondy's biography of CLR James - Marxist, cricketer and lover of Shakespeare

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C L R James: Cricket, The Caribbean and World Revolution

Farrukh Dhondy

205pp, Weidenfeld, £20

What's the link? Pan-Africanism. Shakespeare. Solidarity and the Polish Revolt. American Politics. The West Indies. Cricket. These were the subjects chosen by C L R James when he was invited to give a series of six TV lectures in the early days of Channel 4. They couldn't really be much else, just as no one else could be the subject of a biography with both cricket and world revolution in the title: Trotsky on Bradman and E W Swanton's Practical Guide to the Dialectic being works, alas, that somehow never got written.

James's reputation rests, more than anything, on his ability to straddle planets at opposite ends of the intellectual solar system. He has become an icon of the Black Studies movement, a man who, as Farrukh Dhondy puts it, "supported the idea but not the ideas of Black Power".

He was a Marxist philosopher, though it seems somehow too categorical to pin him down as any kind of -ist other than a Jamesist. He has even been held responsible for a revolution of his own: the bizarre events on Grenada in the early 1980s, which were halted by the US marines once President Reagan had discovered where the place was.

James was born in rural Trinidad 100 years ago, and died in a dingy Brixton flat in 1989, since when he has become fashionable. This is at least the third biography (though Dhondy is not big on sourcing), and there have been various collections of his essays and letters, plus a festschrift and re-issues of his cricketing masterwork *Beyond a Boundary*.

The son of a schoolteacher, James read widely and obsessively and wrote in much the same way. Colonial Trinidad, where the British class system and a rich racial mix created a society with minute gradations of status, provided him with a formative sense of exasperation, but he soon outgrew the island. In the early 1930s, and again in the

It was the intervening years, however, that were the most extraordinary. He moved to the US and, under the pseudonym J R Johnson, became the leading light of a Trotskyite splinter group of monumental obscurity until, after 15 years and at the height of McCarthyism, he was tracked down as an illegal immigrant, imprisoned on Ellis Island and deported.

Much of James's writing was thus showered on an ungrateful American public in the form of pamphlet and polemic, though this period also produced *The Black Jacobins*, James's history of the slave revolt in Haiti. On Ellis Island, he wrote *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, an extended essay on *Moby-Dick* that was apparently printed out and mailed to every Congressman in the hope that it would secure his release.

There is something in that quixotic, naive gesture that sums up James's politics. He has had far more effect on cricket than on the wider world. His most successful agitation came when he returned to the West Indies and campaigned for the appointment of the brilliant Frank Worrell as captain in the late 1950s instead of yet another dimly respectable white man. It is a major theme of *Beyond a Boundary*. When Worrell got the job and became one of the greatest of all captains, he transformed West Indian cricket and its perception of itself forever.

Bernard Coard, who led the second, murderous, coup on Grenada that precipitated Reagan's intervention, still calls himself a Jamesian. Walter Rodney, the Guyanese militant, acknowledged the same debt. But Coard was jailed and Rodney was murdered. "As the only eminent Marxist theoretician the Caribbean has produced," says Dhondy, "it is tempting to lay every tragedy of the sad islands at James's door, or if not at his door, at the imaginative threshold of the many mansions he built." Politically, his reputation has outgrown his actual influence.

This biography is actually more of a memoir, with various riffs and diversions, some of which have more to do with Dhondy than James. The subject lodged with the author for a time, and there are some lovely personal touches, illustrating James's ability to make connections: "The Civil Rights movement," he once insisted in conversation, "began with nylon... the cotton economy was destroyed." But it's mighty hard to come to grips with such a diverse life, and Dhondy succeeds only in snatches.

Final moan to publisher: I remember James as a frail, tiny-seeming, old man. Dhondy talks about the imposing physique of his youth. A few illustrations would have been worth several thousand words. For £20 the reader deserves them.