

# C.L.R. James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World Revolution,

## by Farrukh Dhondy

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C.L.R. James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World Revolution

by Farrukh Dhondy

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In his later years in London, riding the gentle wave of academic fame thrown up for him by the storms of Black Power, C.L.R. James surrounded himself with eager young associates—disciples, one is tempted to call them—who acted as his secretaries, companions, cooks and chauffeurs. Since his death in 1989 a few of these Jamesites have helped swell the rising tide of interest in the sage of Brixton. Anna Grimshaw has edited crucial volumes of his writings; Jim Murray heads the **C.L.R. James Institute** in New York; and now Farrukh Dhondy, with whom James lived briefly in the early 1980s, has written an entertaining biographical study, timed to coincide with the recent centenary.

There's no question we need a big, authoritative biography of James. It's a commonplace to call him the leading Caribbean intellect of the twentieth century; he was a restless thinker, and that same restlessness makes him a biographer's dream, living between the West Indies, Britain and the United States, interacting with major political and intellectual figures, embroiled in many of the largest issues agitating the world in his time. And the mammoth achievements of the biographical profession in the last half-century encourage large expectations: exhaustive documentary research, preferably leading to the discovery of previously unguessed-at facts; first-hand interviews with the subject's friends and enemies, when these persons survive; the investigation of mysterious corners in the subject's life and the unravelling of contentious knots of fact and opinion. (Goodness knows James's eighty-eight-year strand is knotted enough.)

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Dhondy does not even attempt such daunting chores. His chief sources of information, as far as I can make out (his referencing is minimal) are James's published writings, and personal conversations with the old man. His account of James's childhood and adolescence is lifted straight from the pages of *Beyond a Boundary*. Dhondy is exasperatingly vague about those stretches of James's life he happens to know little about, and he hasn't bothered to dig for the details. He also offers some startling errors of fact, for instance making Tunapuna a district of Port of Spain (which may bemuse Lloyd Best), making George Lamming Guyanese (which may bemuse George Lamming), and giving Trinidad and Tobago's Parliament one hundred members (which might well resolve the present deadlock).

Dhondy can be rather clumsy at arranging his material—too many index cards, not enough rubber bands?—arbitrarily abandoning his chronological sequence for a thematic approach, making the middle period of James's life a puzzle for the less-than-fully-alert reader. Unless I blinked too vigorously halfway through the book, there seems to be a misplaced chapter. And Dhondy indulges occasionally in some narrative inventions that may arouse the reader's suspicion. The most prominent of these is an entire stream-of-consciousness chapter from the point of view of Eric Williams. Amusing stuff, in its place, but this biography shouldn't be its place.

Dhondy's distinctly personal version of James is necessarily limited, but his approach does have unanticipated advantages. His first-hand accounts of the elderly James contribute some of the book's best episodes—they make me wish he'd stuck to writing a straightforward memoir of their friendship. He shows us a side of James previously undisclosed—he was a demanding and mercurial old man, requiring Dhondy to take his phone calls, wash and iron his shirts, and boil his breakfast egg for precisely three and a half minutes. "James was polite and took me entirely for granted," is his summary.

But Dhondy also shows us he was a charming conversationalist, eager to share his life's worth of insight, responding warmly to intelligent attention. A young woman "doing research of some sort" pays a call; James's eighty-year-old interest perks up. The relationship

advances with some anxiety; one day Dhondy catches them holding hands. The “courtship” is rapidly snuffed out when James discovers she is living with another man. And perhaps the book’s juiciest plum is James’s attempt to avoid meeting a dramatically beturbaned woman named Queen Mother Moore, whose attendant telephones incessantly, insisting on an appointment. Eventually Dhondy runs out of excuses. “ ‘Tell them anything, man,’ Nello indiscreetly prompts from the other room. ‘Tell them C.L.R. James is dead, he died this afternoon.’ ” (“Nello”, of course, was James’s nickname, a diminutive of his middle name, Lionel.)

He is decidedly subjective in his treatment of James’s career, but Dhondy’s obvious affection for his subject does not cloud his vision; he is no hagiographer. He has a non-specialist’s commonsense clarity about James’s shortcomings, his role in the failures of his three marriages, the inconsistencies in his thought, the absurd lengths of some ideological idealisms at the height of his Trotskyist phase. Dhondy seems frustrated by the time James spent wandering the mazy backroads of socialist factionalism during his fifteen years in the United States. This wry description of the Party’s late-30s anti-war reasoning is typical:

“Workers of Germany should not fight the workers of the rest of Europe and America but rather should unite to overthrow the bourgeoisie. James put all his skill into arguing this point without the least irony, not looking up for a moment to see whether a procession of pigs was moving up ahead on wings.”

He notes that James’s “attempts at practical political intervention had been spectacular failures” in the West Indies and Africa. James believed in the inevitability of world revolution, but the *soi-disant* “Jamesian” revolution in Grenada turned out a carnival of thuggery. The Black Power movement of the 70s took him as an icon—the “ultimate irony” of his life—though he never ceased to assert the authority of Europe’s cultural and intellectual legacy, which made him the thinker he was. “He supported the idea but not the ideas of Black Power.”

But Dhondy is equally apt at summarizing James’s genuine achievements. His polymathic mult好奇心 was extraordinary even in an age of extraordinaires, as was his synthesizing intelligence, performing repeated acts of creative hybridization. His books of Marxist history and

theory—*World Revolution, Notes on Dialectics*—are on their own terms major accomplishments, yet who do they interest today but historians of ideas?

From our current vantage point, the works which most unquestionably matter are *The Black Jacobins*, *American Civilization* and *Beyond a Boundary*. These are the Jamesian classics, according to the classic definition of that category: works grounded in a particular age and place but ever more deeply and more widely relevant to the present. What they have in common first of all is their originality of conception. They are tricky to define or assign to a single discipline, assembling elements of history, literature, political theory, personal observation and popular culture (and cricket!). Called upon to name the sum of their surprisingly disparate parts, one throws up one's hands, saying, "life." They are daring ascents of James's mind at its most independent, panoramas of three distinct societies—Haiti in the throes of revolution, the post-war United States, the West Indies in the years leading to independence—which illuminate the vaster landscape of universal history. It is to their virtue that these works are not definitive: theirs is not the sinking finality of questions completely answered, but the buoyant thrill of fresh leads for eager successors. The sheer scale of their intellectual ambition is James's most valuable legacy.

But. A sizeable but. I confess that reading Dhondy's book plucks up in me the sense of frustrating and vague disappointment I feel whenever contemplating James's career. Why? When I weigh the megaton potential of his talents against his actual achievements, the scale doesn't seem to tip the way I wish. For me, the most poignant and most revealing document of James the man is the series of articles he wrote for the *Port of Spain Gazette* in early 1932, within weeks of his first arrival in Britain, giving his immediate impressions of life in London, and at the same time a glimpse at his thirty-one-year-old personality. He is obviously brilliant, confident, ambitious. Moving in the Bohemian intellectual world of Bloomsbury, he finds he is the equal of any and superior to most. "By instinct and training," he says, "I belong to it and have fit into it as naturally as a pencil fits into a sharpener." He's rather too grown up to talk aloud about forging the uncreated conscience of his race, but one suspects he's thinking on those lines. One feels the hugeness of the possibilities open to him: he could have been the Caribbean's Voltaire, our Emerson, our Mill. A half century stretched ahead of

him, crammed with incident and investigation, dozens of books and articles, acclaim in the Caribbean and in the black studies departments (two parishes from which one fears the world revolution will not rise); but a certain eminence of influence eluded him, and still eludes. *The Black Jacobins*, *American Civilization*, *Beyond a Boundary*: these are great works, but none is the Great Work of which he must have felt capable.

Or is it that the Great Work exists, but no interpreter of sufficient scope has yet arrived to demonstrate it to us? Just as we still require a really big biography of James, a thoroughly Jamesian biography registering the precise magnitude of his existence, could it be that we await the advent of that tirelessly brilliant person who will use James's own methods of erudition, observation, intuition and connective imagination to balance the scale and give us the true weight and worth of the man's idiosyncratic achievements?

It is "a colossal task, none more colossal in our time," as C.L.R. James once said of something entirely different.

