

Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, EDITORS

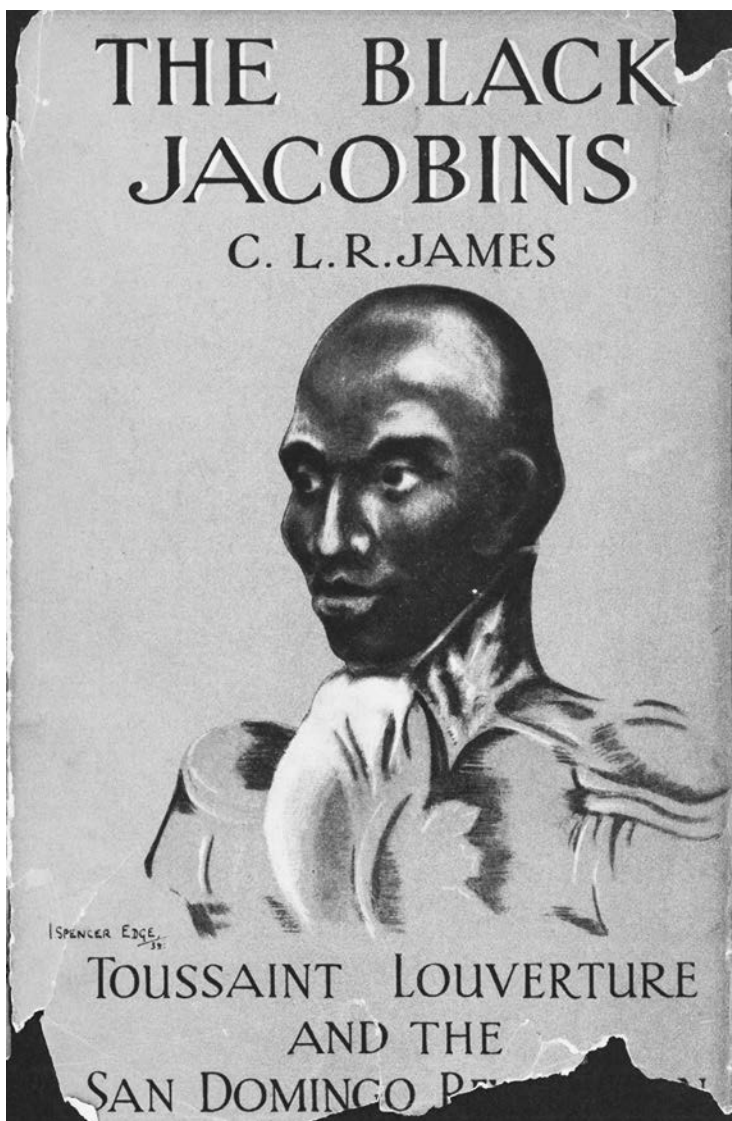
FOREWORD BY Robert A. Hill

# THE BLACK JACOBINS READER



**THE BLACK JACOBINS**  
**READER**

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Original dustjacket from the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, Secker and Warburg, 1938. Image of Toussaint Louverture by (William) Spencer (Millet) Edge (1872–1943). Reproduced with thanks to Marika Sherwood, and with kind permission from The Random House Group Limited.



C. L. R. James, circa 1938.  
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*Robert A. Hill, Series Editor*

# **THE BLACK JACOBINS** **READER**



**CHARLES FORSDICK AND**  
**CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG, EDITORS**

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**FOR STUART HALL**



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CONTENTS

Foreword | ROBERT A. HILL xiii

Haiti | DAVID M. RUDDER xxi

Acknowledgments xxiii

Introduction: Rethinking *The Black Jacobins*  
CHARLES FORSDICK AND CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG 1

*Part I. Personal Reflections*

1 *The Black Jacobins* in Detroit: 1963  
DAN GEORGAKAS 55

2 The Impact of C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*  
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL 58

3 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, and *The Making of Haiti*  
CAROLYN E. FICK 60

4 *The Black Jacobins*, Education, and Redemption  
RUSSELL MAROON SHOATZ 70

5 *The Black Jacobins*, Past and Present  
SELMA JAMES 73

*Part II. The Haitian Revolution: Histories and Philosophies*

6 Reading *The Black Jacobins*: Historical Perspectives  
LAURENT DUBOIS 87

- 7 Haiti and Historical Time  
BILL SCHWARZ 93
- 8 The Theory of Haiti: *The Black Jacobins* and the Poetics  
of Universal History  
DAVID SCOTT 115
- 9 Fragments of a Universal History: Global Capital,  
Mass Revolution, and the Idea of Equality in *The Black Jacobins*  
NICK NESBITT 139
- 10 “We Are Slaves and Slaves Believe in Freedom”: The Problematicizing  
of Revolutionary Emancipationism in *The Black Jacobins*  
CLAUDIUS FERGUS 162
- 11 “To Place Ourselves in History”: The Haitian Revolution in  
British West Indian Thought before *The Black Jacobins*  
MATTHEW J. SMITH 178

### ***Part III. The Black Jacobins: Texts and Contexts***

- 12 *The Black Jacobins* and the Long Haitian Revolution:  
Archives, History, and the Writing of Revolution  
ANTHONY BOGUES 197
- 13 Refiguring Resistance: Historiography, Fiction, and the  
Afterlives of Toussaint Louverture  
CHARLES FORSDICK 215
- 14 On “Both Sides” of the Haitian Revolution? Rethinking Direct  
Democracy and National Liberation in *The Black Jacobins*  
MATTHEW QUEST 235
- 15 *The Black Jacobins*: A Revolutionary Study of Revolution,  
and of a Caribbean Revolution  
DAVID AUSTIN 256
- 16 Making Drama out of the Haitian Revolution from Below:  
C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* Play  
RACHEL DOUGLAS 278
- 17 “On the Wings of Atalanta”  
ALDON LYNN NIELSEN 297

## ***Part IV. Final Reflections***

- 18** Afterword to *The Black Jacobins*'s Italian Edition  
MADISON SMARTT BELL 313
- 19** Introduction to the Cuban Edition of *The Black Jacobins*  
JOHN H. BRACEY 322
- Appendix 1. C. L. R. James and Studs Terkel Discuss  
*The Black Jacobins* on WFMT Radio (Chicago), 1970 329
- Appendix 2. The Revolution in Theory  
C. L. R. JAMES 353
- Appendix 3. Translator's Foreword by Pierre Naville  
to the 1949 / 1983 French Editions 367
- Bibliography 383
- Contributors 411
- Index 415

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## FOREWORD

... It is of the West Indies West Indian.

—C. L. R. James

What an education it would be—whether as to the God of yesterday or today—were we able to hear the true prayers on the lips of the humble!

—Marc Bloch

In the preface of the first 1938 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James announces the first move in the argument to come in the book. “By a phenomenon often observed”—the phenomenon being the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804—“the individual leadership responsible for this unique achievement was almost entirely the work of a single man—Toussaint L’Ouverture.” The history of the Haitian Revolution, James explains, “will therefore largely be a record of his achievements and his political personality.” He goes further and confidently declares: “The writer believes, and is confident the narrative will prove, that between 1789 and 1815, with the single exception of Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro, a slave till he was 45.” No sooner are these broad claims made than James seems to attenuate his argument with an important pair of qualifiers.

The first of the pair is: “Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint.” The second qualifier follows immediately: “*And even that is not the whole truth.*”<sup>1</sup>

The first qualifier is what propelled James’s interpretation of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution into becoming a historical classic and as such prove foundational for all subsequent investigation of the revolution. It provides evidence of James’s penetrating historical insight: the profoundly dialectical

nature of the relationship between Toussaint and the revolutionary movement, such that, as James explains, it becomes almost impossible to determine where one began and the other ended. “The revolution had made him [Toussaint],” he asserts once more,

but it would be a vulgar error to suppose that the creation of a disciplined army, the defeat of the English and the Spaniards, the defeat of Rigaud, the establishment of a strong government all over the island, the growing harmony between the races, the enlightened aims of the administration—it would be a crude error to believe that all these were inevitable.

He goes on to add:

At a certain stage, the middle of 1794, the potentialities in the chaos began to be shaped and soldered by his powerful personality, and thenceforth it is impossible to say where the social forces end and the impress of personality begins. It is sufficient that but for him this history would be something entirely different.<sup>2</sup>

The latter statement reflects the aphoristic clarity of James’s literary style. Another example of his deployment of stunning aphorism occurs in his account of Toussaint’s “extraordinarily difficult”<sup>3</sup> position when faced with France’s preparation to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue. “It was in method, and not in principle, that Toussaint failed,” James informs the reader. By way of underscoring the underlying factor in Toussaint’s quandary, he adds: “The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.”<sup>4</sup>

The same legibility, however, is not evident where the preface’s second qualifier—“And even that is not the whole truth”—is concerned. The reader is left to ponder James’s meaning. Why does he not say it? If “It was the revolution that made Toussaint,” and that was not “the whole truth,” where does one find the missing part, the “truth” that is left unsaid? These questions induce a slightly unsettling experience once the reader begins to ponder them, mainly because it starts to dawn on the reader that perhaps one of the key analytic coordinates on which the analysis hinges and turns remains hidden from view.

Since my first encounter with James’s preface, I have wanted to test my understanding, in the hope that I would be able to discern their real meaning and the search would clarify what James left unsaid. I ask myself: Was it one

of those sudden leaps of understanding that occurs in the very act of writing, which the writer expects to revisit but never does? Perhaps. What if James was engaged in a kind of subterfuge or subversion of Enlightenment rationality? The hint of sarcasm accompanying the statement makes one suspicious. Or was James simply indulging his love of aphorism? Could it be that the force of the argument exceeded his capacity to represent it? It might have been proleptic, in the sense that the argument simply exceeded the framing of the question. In that case, the argument was not indeterminate; rather, it was overdetermined, but before there was a language or set of concepts to describe what James was striving to express.

I suspect the idea came to him all in a flash. We hear an echo in the text when James notes: “We have clearly stated the vast impersonal forces at work in the crisis of San Domingo. But men make history, and Toussaint made the history that he made because he was the man he was.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Toussaint was not alone: “Toussaint was no phenomenon, no Negro freak. The same forces which moulded his genius had helped to create his black and Mulatto generals and officials.”<sup>6</sup>

Intellectually, it is important to recognize that James was writing before the emergence of cultural studies in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which, inspired as it was by a vision of the countervailing power of popular culture, transformed the whole approach to the study of culture. He was writing before E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) ushered in the practice of writing history from below and cemented the field of social history. He did not have available Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), which gave us, in its treatment of the effect of print capitalism on the day-to-day imagining of new kinds of solidarities, a new way to think about languages, literature, and cultural symbols and their role in generating a concept of nationhood and peoplehood. In this context, what I find remarkable is that by the time the second edition of *The Black Jacobins* was published in 1963, James had already arrived at the idea Anderson’s name would become associated with twenty years later. Here is James writing about the Caribbean in 1963:

The people of the West Indies were born in the seventeenth century, in a Westernized productive and social system. Members of different African tribes were carefully split up to lessen conspiracy, and they were therefore compelled to master the European languages, highly complex products of centuries of civilization. From the start there had been the gap, constantly



growing, between the rudimentary conditions of the life of the slave and the language he used. There was therefore in West Indian society an inherent antagonism between the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives, inherent in that it was constantly produced and reproduced not by agitators but by the very conditions of the society itself. It is the modern media of mass communication which have made essence into existence. For an insignificant sum per month, the black masses can hear on the radio news of Dr. Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Dr. Julius [Nyerere], Prime Minister Nehru, events and personalities of the United Nations and all the capitals of the world. They can wrestle with what the West thinks of the East and what the East thinks of the West. The cinema presents actualities and not infrequently stirs the imagination with the cinematic masterpieces of the world. Every hour on the hour all variations of food, clothing, household necessities and luxuries are presented as absolutely essential to a civilized existence. All this to a population which over large areas still lives in conditions little removed from slavery.<sup>7</sup>

It is all the more remarkable, then, that James, working practically alone and before the radical transformation in the understanding of culture that did not emerge until after World War II, was able to anticipate so many of the key ideas that we take for granted today. What he inherited and had available to him, he used brilliantly. This was set out in the 1938 preface:

Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realization, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian.<sup>8</sup>

The year 1963 also marked the publication of James's other major classic, *Beyond a Boundary*. A transformative study not only of cricket but also the aesthetic of organized sport and games, *Beyond a Boundary* was animated throughout by a similar conception of culture hinted at in the 1938 preface. Although the subject matter of *Beyond a Boundary* may have been quite different, the same radical ideal of cultural emancipation supplied the framework. This explains, in my view, the continuing appeal *Beyond a Boundary* exerts on each new generation of readers—exactly as is the case with each new set of readers of *The Black Jacobins*. James tells us that the idea for the book on cricket, as was also the case with *The Black Jacobins*, originated in

the West Indies, but it was in Britain that the material was shaped and imbued with the cultural figuration that received explicit formulation in the 1963 preface to *Beyond a Boundary*. “If the ideas originated in the West Indies it was only in England and in English life and history that I was able to track them down and test them,” he declares, then pointedly adds: “To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew.”<sup>9</sup>

Today we are better able to appreciate the idea that James was alluding to in the 1938 preface of *The Black Jacobins* with his set of qualifiers. I believe that what he was gesturing to there was the idea of *cultural revolution*. Seen against the backdrop of the broad turn toward cultural history that has transformed the discipline of history today, we can begin to appreciate the revolutionary use to which James put the concept of culture in his study of the Saint-Domingue revolution. In this context, we ought to note, in the words of David A. Bell, that today we have available a whole series of “cultural histories of revolution that center on close readings of the language, symbols, imagery, and festive practices of individual revolutions, in a manner that [have] tended to highlight the particularities of each.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously, none of these were available when James was writing *The Black Jacobins*, which makes his achievement all the more remarkable as a pioneering statement of the cultural study of revolution. Thus, it is only now, in the light of history’s cultural turn, that we are able to appreciate *The Black Jacobins* as a study of cultural revolution *avant la lettre*.

What James was trying to get across in the 1938 preface was his conviction that the revolutionary culture of Saint-Domingue provided the critical variable in the revolution. Few people at the time appreciated this. Conversely, we might say that the idea of the Haitian Revolution as a cultural revolution fuels the tremendous outpouring of scholarship on the revolution in recent times.

In seeing himself as “specially prepared to write *The Black Jacobins*,” James claimed that “not the least of my qualifications [was] the fact that I had spent most of my life in a West Indian island not, in fact, too unlike the territory of Haiti.” This feeling of cultural consanguinity made the cultural aspect of the revolution especially vivid for him:

In addition, my West Indian experiences and my study of marxism had made me see what had eluded many previous writers, that it was the slaves who had made the revolution. Many of the slave leaders to the end were

unable to read or write and in the archives you can see reports (and admirable reports they are) in which the officer who made it traces his name in ink over a pencil draft prepared for him.<sup>11</sup>

*The Black Jacobins* contains numerous allusions to James's consciousness of the West Indian dimension of the revolution. He points out, for example, that "those who took the trouble to observe them [the slaves] away from their masters and in their intercourse with each other did not fail to see that remarkable liveliness of intellect and vivacity of spirit which so distinguish their descendants in the West Indies today."<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, "it is as well to remind the reader that a trained observer travelling in the West Indies in 1935 says of the coloured men there, 'A few at the top, judges, barristers, doctors, whatever their shade of colour, could hold their own in any circle. A great many more are the intellectual equals or superiors of their own white contemporaries.'"<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact, as James tells us, that "the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind," it remains the case that it could only have been written by a West Indian. Analyzing the agonizing dilemma Toussaint faced when confronted with the reality of Napoleon's plan to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue, James feels obliged to warn his European readers that it would be "a mistake to see him [Toussaint] merely as a political figure in a remote West Indian island."<sup>14</sup>

The conjoined theme of cultural consanguinity and cultural revolution reaches its apotheosis in James's lengthy appendix to the 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, when he speaks, in the concluding sentence, of "Toussaint, the first and greatest of West Indians."<sup>15</sup> Titled "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," the appendix was completed in January 1963, five months after James had returned to England from the West Indies, where he had spent the previous five years. The appendix attempts to bring up to date the historical significance of the Haitian Revolution within the context of the unfolding Cuban Revolution and sum up the insights gained from his experience in the West Indies. According to James, "What took place in French San Domingo in 1792–1804 reappeared in Cuba in 1958." The slave revolution in French Saint-Domingue marks the beginning of the Caribbean quest for "national identity." "Whatever its ultimate fate," he goes on, "the Cuban revolution marks the ultimate stage of a Caribbean quest for national identity. In a scattered series of disparate islands, the process consists of a series of uncoordinated periods of drift, punctuated by spurts, leaps and catastrophes. But the inherent movement is clear and strong."<sup>16</sup> What James refers to as "the develop-

ment of the West Indian quest for a national identity”<sup>17</sup> is another name for the cultural revolution that started in Haiti and continued throughout the Caribbean.

*And even that is not the whole truth . . .*

We are back where we began. It should be clear that James’s recognition of the truth of the Haitian Revolution as a cultural revolution was not the result of some abstract or objective historical exercise. It required “something other, something more, than a matter of strict historiography”—that is, it operated less on the plane of historiography than on the powerfully introspective terrain of “historical truth.”<sup>18</sup> That, I realize now, is the meaning James was driving at in 1938, the truth which at the time was lacking the requisite language but which he ultimately found in 1963 with “It was of the West Indies West Indian. For it, Toussaint, the first and greatest of West Indians, paid with his life.”<sup>19</sup>

My last and final conversation in person with C. L. R. James took place sometime around 1980–1981. It took place in Washington, DC, in a small room in a house where he was living. He had moved from his apartment shortly before then and was living temporarily with a former student. He was returning to England after a decade of living and teaching in the United States. I was helping him sort through and pack up his books and personal effects.

I told James of my wish one day to organize an edition of his books and collect and edit his papers. He seemed puzzled at the thought. As I had just purchased some of the titles in the new Penguin Books edition of the works of Freud, I mentioned this to him, hoping to provide an example of what might be done with his work. Much to my disappointment and amazement, he looked at me and responded: “Who is going to be interested in my work?”

I must have tried to mutter something, too incoherent to remember now. Although it has been a long time in the making, I believe the answer to James’s querulous response that day in his room, as he was preparing to depart, is contained in the present collection of reflections on *The Black Jacobins*. I think he would be pleased to welcome it, just as I am, to applaud and welcome its auspicious entry into the world.

Robert A. Hill  
Literary Executor  
The C. L. R. James Estate

## Notes

1. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963), ix–x; emphasis added.
2. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 248–49.
3. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 284.
4. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 283.
5. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 91.
6. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 256.
7. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 407.
8. James, *The Black Jacobins*, x.
9. C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xxvii.
10. David A. Bell, “Renewing the Comparative Study of Revolutions,” *AHA Today* (a blog of the American Historical Association), December 7, 2015, <http://blog.historians.org/2015/12/comparative-study-of-revolutions/>.
11. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, with an introduction and notes by James Walvin (London: Penguin Books, 2001), xvi.
12. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York, 1963), 17.
13. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 43. The quotation was from W. M. Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies: A Tract for Africa and the Empire* (London: Books for Libraries Press, 1936), 49.
14. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 291.
15. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 418.
16. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 391.
17. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 396.
18. Nathan Gorelick, “Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti, and the Origin of Psychoanalysis,” *New Centennial Review* 13, no. 3 (2013): 117.
19. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 418.

*In 1988, the Trinidadian calypsonian David M. Rudder composed "Haiti," which was inspired by C. L. R. James's The Black Jacobins and performed at James's funeral in Tunapuna in 1989.*

## VERSE 1

Toussaint was a mighty man  
And to make matters worse he was black  
Black and back in the days when black men knew  
Their place was in the back  
But this rebel still walked through Napoleon  
Who thought it wasn't very nice  
And so today my brothers in Haiti  
They still pay the price.

## CHORUS

Yeah, Yeah,  
Haiti I'm sorry  
We misunderstood you  
One day we'll turn our heads  
And look inside you  
Haiti, I'm sorry  
Haiti, I'm sorry  
One day we'll turn our heads  
Restore your glory.

VERSE 2

Many hands reach out to St. Georges  
And are still reaching out  
To those frightened  
Foolish men of Pretoria  
We still scream and shout  
We came together in song  
To steady the Horn of Africa  
But the papaloa come and the babyloa go  
And still, we don't seem to care.

VERSE 3

When there is anguish in Port au Prince  
It's still Africa crying  
We are outing fires in far away places  
When our neighbours are just burning  
They say the middle passage is gone  
So how come  
Overcrowded boats still haunt our lives  
I refuse to believe that we good people  
Would forever turn our hearts  
And our eyes . . . away.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

## | Rethinking *The Black Jacobins*

CHARLES FORSDICK AND

CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG

In September 1938, the small, independent British left-wing publisher Secker and Warburg published one of the first major English-language studies of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Its author was the black Trinidadian writer, historian, and revolutionary C. L. R. James, and the completion of the book constituted the culmination of his active and productive period in Britain since his arrival in London in 1932.<sup>1</sup> The dust jacket informed its readers that “the black revolution in San Domingo is the only successful slave revolt in history,” the most “striking episode in modern history” and of “immense political significance.” As Secker and Warburg stressed to their readers at the time:

Far from being the chaotic bacchanalia of oppressed savages, the revolution followed with precision the rise and fall of the revolutionary wave in France; and the drama of Toussaint’s career is played out on the surface of a social revolution, unfolding with a logical completeness to be found only in the Russian Revolution of 1917.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to the Russian Revolution was telling, for James’s previous work with Secker and Warburg was *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937), a pioneering political history of the rise of the revolutionary movement after 1917 and its failure and collapse amidst the degeneration of that revolution and the rise of a counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> Yet if the writing of *World Revolution* had clearly emerged out of James’s turn to Marxism and decision to then join the Trotskyist movement in Britain in 1934, the roots of *The Black Jacobins* were more numerous and deep and were first nourished in the soil of his native Trinidad.

## The Emergence of *The Black Jacobins*

In “The Old World and the New,” a lecture delivered on his seventieth birthday in Ladbroke Grove, London, in 1971, James describes with characteristic evasiveness the genesis of his history of the Haitian Revolution: “I don’t know why I was writing *The Black Jacobins* the way I did. I had long made up my mind to write a book about Toussaint L’Ouverture. Why I couldn’t tell you.”<sup>4</sup> The idea of writing a book on the Haitian Revolution clearly preceded his journey from colonial Trinidad to England in 1932. “Stuck away in the back of my head for years,” he commented in *Beyond a Boundary*, “was the project of writing a biography of Toussaint Louverture.”<sup>5</sup> The initial emergence of this book remains unclear, though as Matthew J. Smith shows in his contribution to this volume, the Haitian Revolution had been a subject of discussion by nationalists in the British West Indies since the nineteenth century. For James, it seems that his particular interest in Louverture was actively sparked by his exchanges with Sidney Harland in *The Beacon* the year before his departure from Trinidad. As Selwyn Cudjoe has suggested, it is also clear that James was influenced from an early stage in his thought by the work of J. J. Thomas, the schoolteacher whose 1889 rebuttal to J. A. Froude’s *The English in the West Indies* (1887) was one of the first assertions that Caribbean people had a legitimate claim to govern themselves.<sup>6</sup> Froude had dismissively referred to the Haitian revolutionary: “There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there, with a purpose and character of their own.”<sup>7</sup> In his article “Racial Admixture,” Harland had developed a pseudo-scientific account dependent on heavily racialized taxonomies of IQ, arguing along the same racist lines as Froude’s and presenting Toussaint Louverture as belonging to what he called “class F” in intellectual terms.<sup>8</sup> Dismissing Harland’s article as “antiquated,” naïve, and characterized by “monstrous blunder[s],” James was particularly critical in his response to comments on Louverture, to whom he devotes a long paragraph. In a *reductio ad absurdum* of Harland’s statistics, he claimed:

among every 4,300 men the Doctor expects to find a Toussaint L’Ouverture. He will pick a Toussaint from every tree. According to this theory, Port-of-Spain has fifteen such men, San Fernando two, there is one between Tunapuna and Tacarigua. Or if Dr Harland prefers it that way there are about 80 in Trinidad today. I need carry this absurdity no further. But what respect

can anyone have for a man who in the midst of what he would have us believe is a scientific dissertation produces such arrant nonsense!<sup>9</sup>

In embryonic forms, we see questions that interested James throughout his later life about the exceptionalism (or otherwise) of Louverture, as well as an implicit reflection on whether the revolutionary hero might emerge in other contexts in need of revolutionary change. In the exasperated final section of the article, reflecting on the racial and educational implications of Harland's piece, James concludes: "I think I have written enough. I would have far preferred to write on Toussaint Louverture, for instance."<sup>10</sup>

In suggesting that the Haitian revolutionary might one day be the subject of his own attentions, James includes in his text in *The Beacon* a telling observation about his own sources—"All my quotations," he writes, "are from white historians."<sup>11</sup> The only life of Louverture that is mentioned directly is Percy Waxman's *Black Napoleon*, published in 1931, a work that was dismissed in the bibliographical notes of *The Black Jacobins* as a "superficial book."<sup>12</sup> It is clear that in response James was already envisaging a study of the Haitian Revolution and its inspirational leader that would challenge this prevailing historiography and provide a perspective on this key Caribbean event that would restore an understanding of its world historical significance. Shortly after the exchange with Harland, the catalyst for writing on Louverture presented itself in James's journey to Europe—in particular in his contact with the working people of Nelson, Lancashire, and his observation of their organization industrially in the Nelson Weavers' Association and politically in respect to their historic support for the socialist Independent Labour Party. In *Beyond a Boundary*, James describes his voyage in these terms: "The British intellectual was going to Britain."<sup>13</sup> Edward Said categorizes this transatlantic crossing as a "voyage in," that is, as a destabilizing process whereby the integration of thinkers from colonized countries into metropolitan culture serves as a "sign of adversarial internationalization in an age of continued imperial structures." In Said's terms, "the separations and exclusions of 'divide and rule' are erased and surprising new configurations spring up," and the genesis of *The Black Jacobins* can clearly be seen as symptomatic of such processes and as a key contribution to the challenge to the sense of racial and cultural inferiority James felt had been a central aspect of his British Caribbean education.<sup>14</sup> Such is the importance of writing this history of the Haitian Revolution and the biography of its principal leader in the work produced during James's first stay in Britain that Stuart Hall commented in a 1998 interview with Bill

Schwarz that it was “almost as if it’s one of the reasons for his coming to Europe in the first place.”<sup>15</sup> In the draft of his autobiography, James endorsed this view, associating the interest in the Haitian Revolution with the turning point of his arrival in England:

My concern with being a novelist or a writer was soon to be blown away into dust invisible. The only thing that I took with me and settle [*sic*] down to work with was the idea of showing that the blacks could do things and from my first day in England I began to look for books on the Haitian Revolution.<sup>16</sup>

*The Black Jacobins* would indeed be one of the most significant products of the 1932–38 period in Britain, a period in which—amidst the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe—James intellectually radicalized toward revolutionary Marxism and militant Pan-Africanism and produced a work that itself continued to evolve during the remaining five decades of his life and beyond. Not only does the text in which the history appeared travel through a number of rewritings (in the course of which James increasingly rethought his initial premises and assumptions), it is also central to a constellation of other writings, lectures, and other interventions, ranging from the pre-text found in the 1936 dramatic version *Toussaint Louverture* (itself reworked in 1967) to constant references to Haiti, its revolution, and its revolutionary leaders in correspondence and talks until James’s death. As such—and as this volume attempts to illustrate—*The Black Jacobins* is much more than a book: borrowing a term from Dan Selden, Susan Gillman identifies the text as part of a “text-network,” made up of a series of “translations without an original”;<sup>17</sup> it is the protean centerpiece of the set of reflections on revolution, history, culture, personality, and the urgent need for sociopolitical change that characterizes James’s life; it is a key part of a prolific body of work that reveals the evolving thought of one of the twentieth century’s most significant intellectuals; it is a site in which struggles over the relationship between theory and praxis play themselves out. It remains a major element of James’s legacy and the vehicle whereby his life and work continue to influence action and debate today.

### ***The Black Jacobins* in Context**

It is important to trace the emergence of *The Black Jacobins* in the context of James’s intensive production of a number of other writings, not least another (more contemporary) biographical text, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*:

*An Account of British Government in the West Indies* (1932). The earlier work similarly engages with questions of Caribbean self-government and the place of the charismatic individual in political movements through a discussion of Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, leader of the Trinidadian Workingmen's Association. Whereas the work on Cipriani—an abridged version of which was published as “The Case for West Indian Self-Government” by Hogarth Press in 1933—drew on interviews and material James had gathered in colonial Trinidad, his writings on the Haitian Revolution depended on extensive research that formed part of an energetic engagement with radical historiography and more general Marxist writings. In *Beyond a Boundary*, James suggests that shortly after his arrival in Nelson he began to import from France the books required to consolidate his knowledge of Haitian history and write *The Black Jacobins*. His wider reading at the time—of radical and socialist historians of the French Revolution such as Jean Jaurès and Jules Michelet—provided further impetus to write the Haitian Revolution back in to the period historians came to call “the age of democratic revolution.” Together with his studies of two massive works which—as Bill Schwarz explores in his contribution to this volume—would help make him a Marxist, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, James was, in his own terms, “reading hard”; “Night after night,” he adds, “I would be up till three or four.”<sup>18</sup>

James's securing of work as a professional cricket reporter for the *Manchester Guardian*, together with generous financial support from Harry Spencer (a friend in Nelson), meant that the study of books ordered direct from France was soon complemented by regular research visits to archives in France throughout the 1930s. As soon as the 1933 cricket season was over, James was able to visit Paris and consult documents that had rarely received such serious attention since they had been read by the first generation of Haitian historians—figures such as Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin—in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> He originally had the good fortune to be shown around various archives and bookshops in Paris in the winter of 1933 by Léon-Gontran Damas, a black poet from French Guiana who would be central to the development of the philosophy of *négritude*.<sup>20</sup> As the foreword that James wrote in January 1980 for the Allison and Busby edition of *The Black Jacobins* makes clear, in Paris James also met the Haitian historian and diplomat Colonel Auguste Nemours, who served as Haiti's permanent delegate to the League of Nations in the 1930s before being appointed to the post of minister plenipotentiary to France in 1937.

Nemours is perhaps best remembered for his intervention at the League of Nations in 1935, when he protested against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia with the call: “Craignons d’être, un jour, l’Éthiopie de quelqu’un” [Be afraid of becoming one day someone else’s Ethiopia].<sup>21</sup> Yet Nemours was also the author of a book on Toussaint Louverture, *Histoire de la captivité et de la mort de Toussaint Louverture* (1929), which was described by James in the bibliography of *The Black Jacobins* as a “thorough and well-documented study.” He would later publish several more, including *Histoire de la famille et de la descendance de Toussaint Louverture* (1941), *Quelques jugements sur Toussaint Louverture* (1938), and *Histoire des relations internationales de Toussaint Louverture* (1945). By the time they met in the 1930s, Nemours had also written a two-volume account of the Haitian war of independence, dedicated to Louverture, *Histoire militaire de la guerre d’indépendance de Saint-Domingue* (1925 and 1928), and James records having consulted him particularly on tactical aspects of the revolution, which the Haitian historian had demonstrated “using books and coffee cups upon a large table to show how the different campaigns had been fought.”<sup>22</sup> In the draft of his autobiography, James also notes other contacts that Nemours facilitated: “He introduced me to the Haitian Ambassador in Paris who told me a great deal. Whether he knew it or not he gave me great insight into the Mulatto side of the Haitian people.”<sup>23</sup> The nexus of race and class—and the critique of pigmentocracy—that underpins *The Black Jacobins* was clearly embedded in James’s observations of contemporary Haiti as reflected by its representatives in Paris.

We get some additional glimpses of James’s research trips to Paris during the 1930s from the memoir of Louise Cripps, a friend and comrade in the tiny British Trotskyist movement that James joined soon after his return from France in spring 1934. According to Cripps, James took her and a friend, Esther Heiger, to Paris, probably in spring 1935. The three stayed in Montparnasse in Paris, where the local cafés were “favourite meeting grounds for the Trotskyists at that time (as well as the rendezvous for artists and writers).”<sup>24</sup> James did not miss out on sampling the culture of “black Paris,” and one evening, he took Cripps to one of the black nightclubs, Le Bal Nègre. “It was not a very fancy place, but it was filled with people. There were blacks of every height, weight, and shades of colour from all parts of the world where there are Africans or people of African descent . . . we danced and danced.”<sup>25</sup> The little party also took in French Impressionist art in the Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries Gardens, and in general did a lot of sight-seeing, visiting Le



Louvre, the Bastille, Napoleon's tomb at Les Invalides, and the Palace of Versailles, with James "giving us several lectures as we wandered from place to place."<sup>26</sup> In the drafts of his autobiography, James alludes to visits to Paris with his compatriot and former student Eric Williams, during which the two historians would work together in the archives and at the Bibliothèque nationale:

He covered a lot of work for me, he is a wonderful man at research, collecting information and putting it in some sort of order. [ . . . ] And there are certain pages in the *Black Jacobins* where most of the material and all the footnotes (I would put them in some time) are things that Williams gave to me, I never had occasion to look them up.<sup>27</sup>

The insight into James's working practices is illuminating, and the understanding of *The Black Jacobins* as a collaborative project is one that merits further investigation (not least in the light of James's claim that Williams's Oxford D.Phil. thesis, "The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery," also completed in 1938, was the result of similar collaboration).<sup>28</sup>

From 1932 to 1934, James had turned his research into the Haitian Revolution into a play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, a drama in which one of his main concerns was challenging the ideological tenets behind European colonial domination in general and educating the British public about colonial slavery and abolition during the national commemoration of the centenary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, in his 1998 discussion of how James came to write *The Black Jacobins*, stressed the importance of his campaigning anticolonial activism and his raising of "The Case for West Indian Self-Government" in particular, noting that "what is riveting . . . is the way in which the historical work and the foregrounded political events are part of a kind of seamless web. They reinforce one another."<sup>30</sup> Clearly there was the plight of occupied Haiti itself, under U.S. military domination from 1915 until 1934.<sup>31</sup> In 1935, the question of rallying solidarity with the people of Ethiopia in the face of Mussolini's barbaric war came to the fore, and James played a central role alongside Amy Ashwood Garvey and others in the Pan-Africanist movement in Britain to form the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA). Hall also had in mind the way James was "fired" by the arc of heroic Caribbean labor rebellions that swept the British West Indies from 1935 onward as



“those workers involved in the sugar industry, in oil, and on the docks—the most proletarianized sectors—became conscious of their power.”<sup>32</sup>

This “seamless web” has really yet to be adequately mapped by scholars, and though some have drawn attention to the apparent silence with respect to the Caribbean labor revolts in the work itself, we get glimpses of it nonetheless.<sup>33</sup> For example, on August 9, 1937, several hundred people assembled in London’s Trafalgar Square at a rally organized by the International African Service Bureau (IASB) to hear speeches urging solidarity with Trinidadian and other West Indian workers by James and also his compatriot and friend George Padmore and Chris Braithwaite (who used the pseudonym “Chris Jones”) from Barbados, which itself had also just been rocked by riots.<sup>34</sup> Two Africans, Jomo Kenyatta, the nationalist leader from Kenya, and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, a towering figure of West African trade unionism from Sierra Leone, were among the other speakers. According to the Special Branch agents present,

James gave a resume of the history of the West Indies, explaining that, after the native Caribs had been wiped out, negro slaves had been imported to labour in the islands. Slavery had only been abolished when the British bourgeoisie realised that it was less expensive to pay the negroes starvation wages than to feed them. He compared the West Indian general strike of 1919 with the recent one, saying that black workers had learned much during the last 18 years from events throughout the world. They now knew how to enforce their rights, and how to remain solid in the face of threats and persecution. They were no longer afraid of strike-breaking police, militia and marines.<sup>35</sup>

One of James’s particular leadership roles within the Pan-Africanist movement in Britain during this period seems to have been to put his historical consciousness and knowledge to the service of building solidarity with the various liberation struggles across the African diaspora. As Mussolini’s war drums beat louder in Ethiopia’s direction in summer 1935, James had spoken at a meeting of the newly formed IAFA, an organization he chaired, on July 28 (see figure I.1). According to the *Manchester Guardian*, their cricket correspondent “gave a lucid history of the European treaties with Abyssinia,” and declared that “Abyssinia is a symbol of all that Africa was and may be again, and we look on it with a jealous pride.”<sup>36</sup> James’s passionate speeches in defense of Ethiopia also give a sense of how his study of the Haitian Revolution—and the ruthless guerrilla warfare waged from the mountains



**FIG. 1.1** C. L. R. James speaking on Ethiopia at a rally in Trafalgar Square, London, 1935. Courtesy of Getty Images.

of Haiti by Toussaint's army—clearly fired his imagination about how the coming war against Italian imperialism might be won. On August 16, 1935, at another IAFA rally, James suggested for example that should the Ethiopians find themselves unable to get to grips with the Italian forces in conventional combat, he would “look to them to destroy their country rather than hand it over to the invader. Let them burn down Addis Ababa, let them poison their wells and water holes, let them destroy every blade of vegetation.”<sup>37</sup>

The heroic Ethiopian resistance to fascist Italy's barbaric invasion and occupation after the war began in October 1935 was not the only symbolic demonstration of what Africa “may be again,” as 1935 also saw Copperbelt mineworkers strike in what is now Zambia. As Frederick Cooper has described,

The Northern Rhodesian mineworkers strike of 1935 was organized without benefit of trade unions, and it spread from mine to mine, from mine town to mine town, by personal networks, dance societies, religious organizations, and eventually mass meetings. The movement embraced nonminers in the towns, women as well as men.<sup>38</sup>

For James, after reading about the official British Government Commission of Inquiry into these “disturbances,” the parallel between the movement of Zambian Copperbelt miners and the seditious midnight gatherings of enslaved Africans of French Saint-Domingue could not have been clearer. “Let the blacks but hear from Europe the slogans of Revolution, and the *Internationale*, in the same concrete manner that the slaves of San Domingo heard Liberty and Equality and the *Marseillaise*, and from the mass uprising will emerge the Toussaints, the Christophes, and the Dessalines.”<sup>39</sup> If, as James warned in his pioneering 1937 history of “the rise and fall of the Communist International,” *World Revolution*, and elsewhere, as in his discussion of the Spanish Civil War, Stalinist counter-revolution endangered the possibility of the slogans of the Russian Revolution flowing out of metropolitan Europe to the colonial periphery in the same “concrete manner” as they had in 1789, he retained his optimism nonetheless, insisting the history of the Haitian Revolution pointed to the future for the African continent.<sup>40</sup>

If *World Revolution* focused on the dissipation of revolutionary impetus, *The Black Jacobins* instead told the story of a revolutionary movement that delivered not only emancipation from slavery but also independence from colonial domination. The Haitian example also allowed James, as Anthony

Bogues has suggested, to move away from the factionalism of contemporary politics “to hone his political ideas and elaborate a political theory of revolutionary struggle, national oppression and resistance of the colonial people in Africa and the West Indies.”<sup>41</sup>

### ***The Black Jacobins and Contemporary Historiography***

Leon Trotsky once remarked that “what has been written with the sword cannot be wiped out by the pen . . . at least so far as the sword of revolution is concerned.”<sup>42</sup> As James noted, this had not prevented “Tory historians, regius professors and sentimentalists,” “the professional white-washers” of the historical record, putting their pens to the task of trying to wipe out all trace of what had been written in blood and fire by the black rebel slave army under Toussaint Louverture for well over a century.<sup>43</sup> Eric Williams, whose classic work arising out of his doctoral thesis, *Capitalism and Slavery*, was published in 1944, was right to note that “no work of scholarly importance had been done in England” on the abolition of the slave trade, and that “the British historians wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it.”<sup>44</sup> For Western scholars, the Haitian Revolution, when it was mentioned at all, was essentially portrayed as Froude had described it in *The English in the West Indies*—simply as a bloodthirsty and savage race war, without reason or rhyme.<sup>45</sup>

James systematically demolished this racist argument in *The Black Jacobins*, stressing how race and class were intrinsically intertwined in Saint-Domingue, and so understanding the tumultuous upheaval that was to be so critical to the abolition of the entire Atlantic slave trade through the prism of class struggle remained fundamental. “Had the monarchists been white, the bourgeoisie brown, and the masses of France black, the French Revolution would have gone down in history as a race war. But although they were all white in France they fought just the same.”<sup>46</sup> For the first time James brought cold hard rationality to the history of the revolution, while also developing a pioneering Marxist analysis of Atlantic slavery and the slave trade. In a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the barbarism of slavery than what was soon to be advanced by Williams, James noted that the plantations and the slave ships were fundamentally modern capitalist institutions in themselves, things that did not just enrich but had been themselves formed by “the French bourgeoisie” and “the British

bourgeoisie.” He described the plantations as “huge sugar-factories” and the slaves as a proto-proletariat, indeed, “closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time,” and when they rose as “revolutionary labourers” and set fire to the plantations, he compared them to “the Luddite wreckers.”<sup>47</sup>

James later, with characteristic generosity, praised W. E. B. Du Bois’s achievement in his monumental 1935 work *Black Reconstruction in America* as greater than that of his own in *The Black Jacobins*, where apparently “there is no understanding of when you go beyond the economic and the social and political and you get deep into the psychology of the people who made the revolution.”<sup>48</sup> But this was surely too modest an admission on James’s part, for despite the difficulties in getting source material on the importance of African “survivals” for the Haitian Revolution in the 1930s, he was arguably able to suggestively point to the blackness of the “black Jacobins,” for example, demonstrating how the African cult of Vodou allowed those without “education or encouragement to cherish a dream of freedom.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, in his artistic portrait of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, above all Toussaint Louverture, James showed a biographer’s grasp of individual psychology as well as the mass collective psychology of the revolutionary slaves.

Yet James’s critical stress on black agency—making the central plot of his “grand narrative” the dramatic transformation in consciousness and confidence of the Haitian masses—was combined with a masterful grasp of the totality of social relations in which they acted. His reading of the Marxist classics, above all Trotsky’s masterful *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), saw James make a pioneering and outstanding application to the colonial Caribbean of the historical “law of uneven but combined development” of capitalism. As Trotsky had noted, the peculiarities resulting from the “backwardness” of Russian historical development had explained the “enigma” that “a backward country was the *first* to place the proletariat in power”:

Moreover, in Russia the proletariat did not arise gradually through the ages, carrying with itself the burden of the past as in England, but in leaps involving sharp changes of environment, ties, relations, and a sharp break with the past. It is just this fact—combined with the concentrated oppressions of czarism—that made the Russian workers hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought—just as the backward industries were hospitable to the last word in capitalist organization.<sup>50</sup>

One of James's most striking achievements in *The Black Jacobins* was his demonstration that just as "the law of uneven but combined development" meant the enslaved laborers of Saint-Domingue, suffering under the "concentrated oppressions" of slavery, were soon to be "hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought" radiating from the Jacobins in revolutionary Paris, so the Marxist theory of permanent revolution illuminated not just anticolonial struggles in the age of socialist revolution but also the antislavery liberation struggle in the age of "bourgeois-democratic" revolution. The bold Haitian rebels were, James insisted, "revolutionaries through and through . . . own brothers of the Cordeliers in Paris and the Vyborg workers in Petrograd."<sup>51</sup>

Throughout his study of the Haitian Revolution, James ably demonstrated that it was not simply an inspiring struggle on a tiny island on the periphery of the world system, but was inextricably intertwined with the great French Revolution throughout, pushing the revolutionary process forward in the metropole and investing notions of human rights with new meanings and universal significance. In writing about the Haitian Revolution, he rewrote the history of the French Revolution as well.<sup>52</sup> In *The Black Jacobins* he fused classical and Marxist scholarship to resurrect a vivid panorama of the Haitian Revolution, stressing that it was not simply the greatest event in the history of the West Indies but took its place alongside the English Civil War, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution as one of the great world-historical revolutions in its own right, a revolution that had forever transformed the world and laid the foundation for the continuing struggle for universal human rights. "The work of Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion endures in Hayti, but what they did went far, far beyond the boundaries of the island."<sup>53</sup>

Edward Said once suggested that *The Black Jacobins* might be usefully compared with George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, which also appeared in 1938.

Despite the differences between the indigent and itinerant West Indian Black Marxist historian and the more conservative, highly educated, and brilliantly well-connected Arab, both addressed their work to a world they considered their own, even if that very European world of power and colonial domination excluded, to some degree subjugated, and deeply disappointed them. They addressed that world from within it, and on cultural grounds they disputed and challenged its authority by presenting alternative versions of it, dramatically, argumentatively, and intimately.<sup>54</sup>



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**SECKER & WARBURG**

**FIG. 1.2** Image of Secker and Warburg's 1938 advertisement for *The Black Jacobins*. Courtesy of the C. L. R. James Estate.

*The Black Jacobins* has other contemporary “others.” Alex Callinicos has usefully described how “the example offered” by both Leon Trotsky’s political writings in the 1920s and 1930s and by his *History of the Russian Revolution*

inspired some of the ablest of his followers to write contemporary histories of other twentieth-century revolutions that sought to trace the interplay of class interests and political forces that in each case led to defeat—Harold Isaacs on the Chinese Revolution of 1925–7, Pierre Broué on the German Revolution and on the Spanish Civil War, Adolfo Gilly on the Mexican Revolution.<sup>55</sup>

In many ways, James’s work should also be located within this tradition, with respect to charting contemporary revolutionary defeats in *World Revolution* and an eighteenth-century revolutionary victory in *The Black Jacobins*. As he famously put it in his 1938 preface to *The Black Jacobins*, evoking John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” he felt “the fever and the fret” of the Spanish Revolution when writing up his magisterial history of the Haitian Revolution in Brighton in the winter of 1937. “It was in the stillness of a seaside suburb that could be heard most clearly and insistently the booming of Franco’s heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin’s firing squads and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary movement striving for clarity and influence.”<sup>56</sup>

### **Contemporary Responses to *The Black Jacobins***

It is tempting to follow David Patrick Geggus and retrospectively conclude that ever since its publication in 1938, *The Black Jacobins* “has dominated study of the Haitian Revolution in the English-speaking world.”<sup>57</sup> In reality, the reception to the work was a little more complicated. For the activist audience who mattered most to James, above all George Padmore and Paul Robeson, his account of the Haitian Revolution was immediately celebrated. As James recalled, both Padmore and Robeson responded in essentially the same fashion: “James, I always knew the history was there, that we had it.”<sup>58</sup> Padmore’s review of *The Black Jacobins* emphasized how “the author has done justice to his subject.”

He has combined with great skill history and biography without sacrificing one to the other. Mr James is a real historian, with the sensitive mind of the scholar and an excellent literary style . . . who writes with vigour and incisiveness . . . *The Black Jacobins* is a fascinating story, brilliantly



told, and should be an inspiration to Africans and other colonial peoples still struggling for their freedom from the yoke of white imperialism.<sup>59</sup>

Members of the IASB in Britain, including such figures as Jomo Kenyatta and Amy Ashwood Garvey, would have read *The Black Jacobins* in 1938, and Amy Ashwood would later hail it as “the most revolutionary book on Toussaint L’Ouverture.”<sup>60</sup> Copies were quickly sent out to contacts in the colonial world as James prepared to leave Britain for a tour of the United States. It is noteworthy in this regard that the British state intercepted a letter dated October 19, 1938, that Secker and Warburg sent to one of James’s comrades in the Pan-African movement, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, who was back in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

At the suggestion of George Padmore, I send you herewith a review copy of C.L.R. James’s *THE BLACK JACOBINS* for review in the *West African Standard*. I feel sure you will do what you can to promote the book and Padmore thinks you will be able to sell in your district a dozen or so copies. I hope this may be the case.<sup>61</sup>

On January 6, 1939, Wallace-Johnson, in the midst of organizing a highly successful branch of the militant nationalist West African Youth League in Sierra Leone in the context of a growing political and economic crisis in the colony, launched a new paper. The first editorial of the *African Standard* was certainly in keeping with the spirit of *The Black Jacobins*, boldly declaring that “the crowning victory of our warfare is the end of the structure of capitalism, the complete collapse of imperialism and the triumph of the cause of self-determination for the oppressed sections of humanity the world over,” and it seems they also carried Padmore’s review of *The Black Jacobins*—also published in *The People* (a Trinidadian paper).<sup>62</sup> In Britain, despite several worthy reviews, including two by comrades of his (the British Marxist Arthur Ballard and Dorothy Pizer, Padmore’s partner), the work was all but ignored outside the Pan-Africanist and Trotskyist movement.<sup>63</sup>

Flora Grierson in the *New Statesman* famously dismissed *The Black Jacobins* because of its “bias,” noting James was “a Communist and wants us to see the worst.”<sup>64</sup> Leaving aside the question of quite which “best” bits of the slave experience Grierson had hoped to see James highlight, the awful truth was that if he had actually been a Communist with a capital C, the work would have received greater attention on publication. *The Black Jacobins* certainly did not warrant anything like the attention given to Soviet novelist Anatolii

Vinogradov's 1935 *The Black Consul*, which James later recalled enjoyed an "enthusiastic welcome in almost the whole British press."<sup>65</sup> As Eugene Genovese noted, *The Black Jacobins* "deserves to rank as a classic of Marxian historiography but has been largely ignored, perhaps because of the author's Trotskyist politics."<sup>66</sup> There was no "perhaps" about it. In 1934, in a review of the powerful antifascist novel *Fontamara* by the anti-Stalinist writer Ignazio Silone, Trotsky asked, "has this book been published in the Soviet Union? Has it come to the notice of the publishing houses of the Third International? This book deserves a circulation of many million copies."<sup>67</sup> Six years later, after Trotsky's murder in 1940, James praised Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and made a similar point, noting "had the Third International been a revolutionary organization, this book, with its knowledge, its confidence, and its will, would have inspired, directly and indirectly, millions of political leaders all over the world."<sup>68</sup> The argument here stands with respect to James's *Black Jacobins*, too.

If general indifference among British intellectuals might have been inevitable by 1938 as the clouds of war gathered overhead, *The Black Jacobins* nonetheless found an audience among a select few. The work inspired many socialists in and around the Independent Labour Party and it had been a leading member of this organization, Fenner Brockway, who had first introduced James to the publisher Fredric Warburg, of Secker and Warburg, back in 1936.<sup>69</sup> The young future Labour leader Michael Foot also recalled reading it at the time and being "swept along, like most other readers, by the excitement and the passion, the sheer narrative drive."<sup>70</sup> The Communist Eric Hobsbawm recalled that "C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins* was read, in spite of the author's known Trotskyism" by some of those who went on to form the Historians' Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain, so crucial to helping develop the tradition of "people's history" and then "history from below" after World War II.<sup>71</sup> These intellectuals aside, Peter Fryer accurately judged that James "might have been writing in German for all the notice that was taken by historians" in Britain.<sup>72</sup>

When Dial Press published a U.S. edition in November 1938, the reception was rather better, perhaps helped somewhat by James's presence in the United States as well as the contemporary interest in Haiti in the period immediately following the 1915–1934 occupation. William Seabrook, a U.S. writer who had visited occupied Haiti and was the author of an influential work on Haitian Vodou, *The Magic Island* (1929), wrote a very perceptive review in the *Journal of Negro History*:

Mr. James has rendered the public a service for which he merits the attention due a scholar who blazes the way in an all but neglected field . . . with this comprehensive view of the history of the island and those who made it the author has given the public a work which surpasses any production in this field hitherto published . . . *Black Jacobins* deserves a warm welcome and an extensive circulation.<sup>73</sup>

Harold Courlander, a U.S. anthropologist who had been influenced by Seabrook and soon published his first book about Haitian life, *Haiti Singing* (1939) (he later wrote a classic work on Haitian culture, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* in 1960), reviewed the work in the *Saturday Review of Literature*:

*The Black Jacobins* is not a simple account of this epic revolt in the West Indies. Nor could it be simple. But for the first time the scene is viewed with complete perspective and the theme recorded with understanding. It is not only one of the most sharply defined stories of the period to be published in our time, it is told in terms which have contemporary significance. "To the African robbed of his land and segregated, what does it matter whether the robbers are fascists or democrats?" It may prove to be the text of tomorrow's events in Africa.<sup>74</sup>

Rayford W. Logan, a leading black U.S. historian at Howard University who had links to the Roosevelt administration, and who had also conducted research in occupied Haiti, was more reserved in his praise than were Seabrook and Courlander. Nonetheless Logan concluded his review for *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* by noting that

*The Black Jacobins* is a notable contribution to the history of the Caribbean and of the class struggle . . . this study definitely established Mr. James as an historian from whom other authoritative monographs may be expected. This is certainly one of the books that our libraries will want to display during Negro History Week.<sup>75</sup>

Other scholars such as Ludwell Lee Montague, based at the Virginia Military Institute and soon to publish *Haiti and the United States, 1714–1938* in 1940, were also appreciative, with Montague noting that James "finds his way with skill through kaleidoscopic sequences of events in both Haiti and France, achieving clarity where complexities of class, color, and section have reduced others to vague confusion."<sup>76</sup>

While African American journals such as *The Crisis* and Trotskyist journals like *New International* were naturally enthusiastic, even *Time* magazine hailed *The Black Jacobins* as

an impassioned account of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Santo Domingo revolution, written from the Marxist point of view by a young British Negro. It bristles with harrowing atrocities, fiery denunciations of imperialism, but manages to give a vivid account of a revolution which greatly influenced U.S. history before the Civil War.<sup>77</sup>

An equally glowing review followed in the *New York Times*, which noted that “Mr. James is not afraid to touch his pen with the flame of ardent personal feeling, a sense of justice, love of freedom, admiration of heroism, hatred for tyranny—and his detailed richly documented and dramatically written book holds a deep and lasting interest.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Underground Histories: The Persistent Presence of *The Black Jacobins***

Despite such praise, as James went “underground” in the United States in 1939, living a pseudonymous existence to be able to stay and work with Raya Dunayevskaya and the other members of the Johnson-Forest tendency within U.S. Trotskyism, *The Black Jacobins* also became something of an underground text, rapidly going out of print. One rare intellectual in the United States who did manage to make use of it was the Austrian radical anthropologist Eric R. Wolf (1923–1999)—later author of the classic studies *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) and *Europe and the People without History* (1982)—who had come across James’s writings as a seventeen-year-old refugee from fascism while interned in England in 1940 with other “aliens” at an Alien Internment Camp at Huyton near Liverpool. “I learned about Marxism by reading C.L.R. James,” Wolf recalled.<sup>79</sup> “C.L.R. James . . . got me to think of Marxian methods to understand colonialism and global inequalities. That gave me an entry into the so-called underdeveloped world. From there, I read some political science, social science, and finally, just before the war, anthropology.”<sup>80</sup> Studying anthropology at Columbia University after World War II, Wolf formed a study circle with others, including Sidney Mintz. As Wolf recalled,

during those years I read three landmark books which suggested that anthropology could gain much from the infusion of Marxian understandings . . .

Karl Wittfogel's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* (1931), an extraordinary, ecologically orientated study of the Chinese economy . . . Paul Sweezy's *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (1942) . . . the third was C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938), on the slave rebellions in Haiti in the wake of the French Revolution, one of the first attempts to write a history of a people supposedly "without history."<sup>81</sup>

Yet James remembers how the few African intellectuals who managed to get hold of a copy were certainly impressed by its thesis that "placed the revolutionary struggle squarely in the hands of the Africans."<sup>82</sup> Among these was the future leader of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, whom James met in the United States during World War II. As James recalled, "Nkrumah read the book and we talked about it."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, if "C.L.R. James" had somewhat faded from view, his reputation as the author of *The Black Jacobins* persisted. Though James—unlike Nkrumah—was not present himself at the historic Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in October 1945, the official report edited by George Padmore included *The Black Jacobins* in its list of suggested reading.<sup>84</sup> In the summer of 1947, Raya Dunayevskaya visited Britain and attended a left-wing demonstration in London's Trafalgar Square. As she wrote to James back in the United States, "I noticed one of the Negro RAF men had the identification 'Trinidad', so I proceeded to introduce myself and ask whether he had ever heard of fellow Trinidadian [C.L.R. James]. An author? Yes. 'Black Jacobins'? Yes."<sup>85</sup> In the Caribbean, the work clearly proved an inspiration. A young Trinidadian radical, John La Rose, recalled coming across "the world classic *The Black Jacobins*" long before he was able to meet James. "I remember I had been so moved by his description of Boukman and his fellow revolutionaries on the mountain making the blood sacrifice amid thunder and lightning in 1791 at the start of the Haitian revolution that I wrote my first poem there and then."<sup>86</sup>

During the war, a French Trotskyist, Pierre Naville—who had first met James in Paris in 1936—translated the work into French in 1943–1944, when France itself was under Nazi occupation.

My opinion at that time was that if France succeeded in restoring its national sovereignty—with the help of the Anglo-American forces—her first duty would be to give back freedom to its colonial empire as it existed before 1939. I thought that the publication of this book by James, whom I had known before the war, dedicated to the freedom struggle of the 'Hai-

tians' in Saint-Domingue during the first French Revolution, would serve this purpose.<sup>87</sup>

*Les Jacobins noirs*, Naville's French translation, eventually appeared in 1949, but David Geggus has noted that "the book has never been very popular with Francophone readers," perhaps, he suggests, because of superficial factual errors that might have been noticed by an educated French audience.<sup>88</sup> In February 1950, in *Les Temps Modernes*, Louis Ménard declared *The Black Jacobins* "most topical and most useful, as Naville stresses in his preface. The analysis and the way he [James] disproves a thousand abusive or calumnious tall stories about the cruelty of the Black insurgents are particularly instructive." Nonetheless, Ménard wondered at whether the Haitian Revolution really represented "the revolutionary success" that James saw it as, noting

there is a problem: to what extent was the framework of bourgeois principles which Toussaint used not a new form of exploitation of the Black proletariat, but more subtle, and still far from a true liberation? . . . The fight of San Domingo only appears to be a revolutionary fight when viewed with the perspective afforded by other times and other events.<sup>89</sup>

This review forced James to protest by letter to the editors of *Les Temps Modernes*, noting the Haitian Revolution was "a revolution for the abolition of basic slavery; to assure their liberty, the Blacks judged it necessary to establish an independent State. I feel uncomfortable to have to declare that I consider these goals to be valid in themselves." As he continued,

The revolution of San Domingo received its impetus from the French Revolution, and could not have been achieved without it, but reciprocally, the Blacks' fight proved a powerful contribution to the victories against the counter-revolution in France. In this way the slaves' revolution does not only have an immediate justification, but also an historic justification.

As for Ménard's argument that Toussaint did not deliver "true liberation" for the enslaved of Saint Domingue, James was scathing:

Of what does this "true" liberation consist? The only meaning I can give him is the socialist abolition of all exploitation of man by man. It is not reasonable to blame Toussaint for not having tried to achieve that. The only liberation in question was the liberation from basic slavery and it was a liberation that was fairly "true." Mr. Ménard passes over this point as if it were

without importance. I insist—if I insist on something—on the fact that it was of a great importance, in the sense that I have talked about above . . .

As to the particular type of thought that this review seems to me to reveal, I abstain from any comment. But my book is a study of revolutionary theory and practice, referring especially to colonial revolution, and it really was not possible for me to let the interpretation of it given by Mr. Ménard stand without correcting it.<sup>90</sup>

Causing a stir in *Les Temps Modernes* aside, the French translation enabled the work to reach at least some Francophone anticolonialists, including, it appears, Frantz Fanon.<sup>91</sup> It also ensured the work finally made an impact in Haiti itself, where James recalled it quickly became something akin to a Bible. “When *The Black Jacobins* was published in French, it was read and deeply admired in Haiti. I unreservedly took the side of the slaves. Yet it was years before they discovered that the book was written by a Negro and a West Indian. That testifies to the historical objectivity.”<sup>92</sup>

The appearance of the 1949 edition helped facilitate a dialogue between James and the Haitian historian Étienne Charlier, a member of the Déjeune Party, who wrote one of the first Marxist critiques of Haitian history (*Aperçu sur la formation historique de la nation haïtienne*, 1954). Charlier was also one of the first to stress the role of the maroons in helping ignite the Haitian Revolution, provoking historiographic controversy in Haiti and further afield. As W. E. B. Du Bois noted in 1955,

from the time of Columbus . . . in every island . . . there were hundreds of slave revolts which prove, as Haitian historians say, that the French Revolution did not spread from France to the West Indies but from the West Indies to France. Negro revolt under the Maroons culminated in Haiti where Britain, France and Spain were worsted and the United States was frightened into stopping the slave trade.<sup>93</sup>

Another of Charlier’s arguments—which triggered a robust response from a number of Haitian intellectuals, including Jean Price-Mars—was that 150 years after the revolution, pigmentocracy continued to determine social class in Haiti. Emmanuel Paul attacked Charlier for perpetuating the “mulatto legend” of Haitian history through suggestions that maroon revolt was precursory to the revolution that began in 1791,<sup>94</sup> and James—in a 1955 letter to Charlier—contested the claim that Louverture was “a man of the ancient regime.” Repeating the key thesis of *The Black Jacobins*, James again presents