

CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG

**C. L. R. JAMES IN  
IMPERIAL BRITAIN**



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# **C. L. R. JAMES IN IMPERIAL BRITAIN**

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**CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG**

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**FOR MY PARENTS**



All who are alive today who remember him are old men. Some of them never spoke to him at all. Some saw him once. Some never saw him. Yet his personality still lives vividly with them. Those must be indeed great men, says Hazlitt, whose shadows lengthen out to posterity.

—C. L. R. JAMES,  
“Michel Maxwell Philip” (1931)





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## ABBREVIATIONS

ARPS	Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (Gold Coast)
BUF	British Union of Fascists
BWIR	British West Indies Regiment
CGT	General Confederation of Labour (France)
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CSA	Colonial Seamen's Association
IAFA	International African Friends of Abyssinia
IASB	International African Service Bureau
ICS	Institute of Commonwealth Studies
ILD	International Labour Defence
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ITUC-NW	International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers
LAI	League against Imperialism
LCP	League of Coloured Peoples
LHA	Labour History Archive and Study Centre (Manchester)
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (America)
NWA	Negro Welfare Association
QRC	Queen's Royal College
TNA	The National Archives (Kew, London)
TWA	Trinidad Workingmen's Association
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
WASU	West African Students' Union





## INTRODUCTION | “Revolutionaries, Artists and Wicket-Keeper’s”

C. L. R. James’s Place in History

What is now happening to Marx’s doctrine has occurred time after time in history to the doctrine of revolutionary thinkers and leaders of oppressed classes struggling for liberation. . . . Attempts are made after their death to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to speak, and to confer a certain prestige on their names so as to “console” the oppressed classes by emasculating the essence of the revolutionary teaching, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it.

—Vladimir I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1918)

Idiots and bourgeois scoundrels always emphasise Trotsky’s personal brilliance whereby they seek to disparage Trotsky’s method. The two are inseparable. His natural gifts were trained and developed by Marxism and he could probe these depths of understanding and ascend to these peaks of foresight because he based himself on the Marxian theory of the class struggle and the revolutionary and predominant role of the proletariat in the crisis of bourgeois society.

—C. L. R. James, “Trotsky’s Place in History” (1940)

“One of the abiding ironies of Cyril Lionel Robert James’s intellectual career,” Grant Farred noted in 1996, is that “since his death in London in 1989, and for perhaps half a decade before that, the Caribbean thinker has already been able to secure a status denied to him during most of his life.”<sup>1</sup> One might wonder just how much of an “abiding irony” it is for a revolutionary socialist, who felt toward the end of his life that one of his “greatest contributions” had been “to clarify and extend the heritage of Marx and Lenin,” not to have secured more of a status in late capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the belated “discovery” of C. L. R. James since the 1980s has been quite remarkable. Every year it seems a new biography or collection of his writings or speeches adds to what we already know, and as Farred

noted, “With the emergence of fields such as cultural studies, popular culture, and postcolonial studies, James is now an object of research.”<sup>3</sup>

All this attention is welcome, and that the Trinidadian historian, theorist, and activist has posthumously become a fashionable “object of research” has not been without value for anyone attempting to understand the life and work of this generally long-overlooked political thinker. What, then, could be the possible justification for adding another work—and on a biographical theme—to the now voluminous secondary literature on James? Surely we know more than enough after multiple biographies on top of nearly thirty years of relatively sustained “James scholarship.” A crucial part of the answer lies in the fact that the recent surge of writing about James has markedly reflected its time and place. The prevailing contemporary, intellectual fashion in modern—or perhaps “postmodern”—academia remains set against any attempt to see James’s life’s work as a coherent totality with any unity to it beyond a slightly abstract sense in which he “rethought race, politics, and poetics” through “a critique of modernity” and engaged in a “struggle for a new society.”<sup>4</sup> The tone was set with the very first biography, *C. L. R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (1989), in which Paul Buhle argued that a poststructuralist “de-centering may bring a reconciliation of the myriad varieties of particular genius, not merely of a few powerful cultures in our own age but of every cultural expression from the past which is still, in any meaningful sense, recuperable.”<sup>5</sup>

This Foucauldian focus on the “fragment” might seem at first a far more appropriate approach than any attempt to directly make a claim for James as simply, say, a Marxist, or a Pan-Africanist, as his concerns and means of expressing them were extremely broad. As Martin Glaberman once observed, “It is the very richness of his life that makes an assessment of James more difficult” as we “have not and could not share the range of what James has done.”<sup>6</sup> Peter Fryer once described how James’s “stature simply bursts any category a writer tries to squeeze him into. . . . One can no more catch and label the essence of C. L. R. James than one can cage a cloud.”<sup>7</sup> However, a number of problems have since emerged with the “decentered” perspective. Rather than seeing a “reconciliation” of the “myriad varieties” of James’s genius, as a number of scholars collectively worked toward building up a single portrait, Glaberman noted that what he saw instead emerging in the literature was “a fragmented James: James as cultural critic, James as Marxist theoretician, James as Third World guru, James as expert on sports, etc.” That scholars would produce “their own James” was not inevi-

table, but it was always going to be a danger, given the highly specialized nature of modern academia and contemporary pressures to publish, and consequently Glaberman described how many writers have simply “taken from him what they found useful and imputed to him what they felt necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

More critically, a general lack of concern for the fine complexities of his life has not been overcome by what Farred celebrates as “the centrality of cultural studies within James scholarship.”<sup>9</sup> This has steadily led to one “James” in particular coming to the fore, and some of the consequences of being “claimed” by cultural and postcolonial studies can be usefully seen through a comparison with Frantz Fanon, another towering West Indian revolutionary figure. David Macey, Fanon’s biographer, once described postcolonial studies as “a continuation of English literature by other means” and warned that “the danger is that Fanon will be absorbed into accounts of ‘the colonial experience’ that are so generalized as to obscure both the specific features of his work and the trajectory of his life.” Many studies of Fanon, Macey continued, focused “almost exclusively” on his psychoanalysis and his work *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The ‘post-colonial’ Fanon worries about identity politics, and often about his own sexual identity, but he is no longer angry. And yet, if there is a truly Fanonian emotion it is anger.” Indeed, postcolonial readings of Fanon “studiously avoid the question of violence,” his commitment to the Algerian Revolution, and even his classic *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>10</sup>

James’s posthumous canonization as a “pioneering icon” of “cultural studies” and “postcolonial studies” has not perhaps come at such a price as that paid by Fanon, but this is not to say that it has not come without its price.<sup>11</sup> In his insightful study published in 1997, Aldon Lynn Nielsen suggested that while “James is patently not a ‘deconstructionist,’ . . . it is equally clear that James’s analyses . . . are part of an international theoretical development that brings us to the threshold of poststructuralist, post-Marxist, and postcolonial critiques.”<sup>12</sup> Since then, a recent study by the sociologist Brett St. Louis, written from a standpoint of unconditional but critical support for what he calls the “irresistible march of identity politics and post-modernism,” has insisted that, given the apparent “epistemological erosion of the ‘old’ certainties of (organised) class struggle and framework of historical materialism signals the death of unitary subjectivity and its explanatory ‘grand narratives,’” James’s significance lies in the way that he “grapples with a proto-post-marxist problematic.”<sup>13</sup> The extent to which such views

have become “common sense” in contemporary academia, even among many James scholars, is apparent from Farred’s edited collection, *Rethinking C. L. R. James* (1995). Disparaging “earlier modes of James studies” and the “debates that occupied sectarian James scholars” about such matters as class struggle and revolutionary theory, Farred salutes James’s seminal semiautobiographical cultural history of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a work “eminently suited to the burgeoning field of cultural studies[,] . . . a testament to subtle, heavily coded anti-colonial resistance, a work which maps the problematic trajectory of the postcolonial through the colonial[,] . . . a work we can return to again and again.”<sup>14</sup> *Beyond a Boundary* indeed deserves such acclamation, but Farred then goes on to declare the work not simply “the major achievement of [James’s] cultural activism” but “undoubtedly James’s definitive work” and a “salient” alternative to James’s “texts on ‘real’ politics.” What, a student might in that case justifiably ask, is the point of studying *The Black Jacobins*, James’s “grand narrative” of the Haitian Revolution (or, heaven forbid, reading his other more directly “sectarian” political writings), if it is the case that, as Farred tells us, any “insight and brilliance” in such works is “matched” by the way *Beyond a Boundary* “was able to profile the radical potentialities of the Caribbean proletariat” open to it through playing cricket?<sup>15</sup>

In 1989 Buhle was optimistic about what he called the emerging “field” of “James scholarship.” As Buhle put it, “My satisfaction lies chiefly in imagining the myriad creative possibilities to which James’s contributions can be put.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, more recently, Buhle has not sounded a particularly satisfied note, reflecting on almost twenty years of sustained James scholarship that “the very ‘field’ had barely emerged before it veered away from social history and outright political claims, tending toward literary criticism and cultural studies.” Consequently, “interest in James the revolutionary thinker lagged badly. . . . Mostly, he seemed a prophet neglected if not scorned.”<sup>17</sup>

This then is one important justification for beginning a reexamination of James’s intellectual and political evolution in imperial Britain from 1932 to 1938, a period that has long been “neglected if not scorned” in the literature of James scholarship. Despite being a period of James’s life and work that is as full of inherent “creative possibilities” as any other, these were the fateful years in which James made a shift away from primarily “cultural activism” to embrace “real” politics. Accordingly, the “possibilities” that most concerned James since the mid-1930s — socialist revolution and anti-imperialist revolt — are those no postmodern academic today would

even dare admit to “imagining,” let alone commit themselves to agitating for. Yet without a clear understanding of these years there is no possibility of ever fully understanding James, “the revolutionary thinker.” When asked “what would you most like to be remembered for” in an interview in 1980, James was quite explicit and unequivocal:

The contributions I have made to the Marxist movement are the things that matter most to me. And those contributions have been political, in various ways; they have been literary: the book [on] *Moby Dick* [*Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*] is a study of the Marxist approach to literature. All of my studies on the Black question are [Marxist] in reality. . . . On the whole, I like to think of myself as a Marxist who has made serious contributions to Marxism in various fields. I want to be considered one of the important Marxists.<sup>18</sup>

Given this, one might have thought that James’s years in 1930s Britain would be considered as critical as the years in which he developed into an important Marxist intellectual, among other things. Yet the comparative lack of attention in recent James scholarship to this period remains striking. As Buhle noted with regret in 2006, reflecting on his own early biography of James, “The subsequent biographies, up to the present, have not pushed appreciatively further in respect to his Caribbean background (and continuing connections) and his sojourn in the United Kingdom in the 1930s.”<sup>19</sup> The situation here remains much as Buhle found it in the early 1990s, when he noted that “James’s English years, his milieux, political activities, and influences” remained “the least studied” and “surely deserve a volume of their own.”<sup>20</sup>

Without such studies, we are too often prisoners left trapped with the prevailing image of James as simply the urbane “Grand Old Man of Letters,” perhaps slumbering in an armchair. Timothy Brennan has described how in later life James’s characteristic “manner of working was to spend his days for the most part in disheveled bedrooms, under sheets, reading T. S. Eliot with the TV on.”<sup>21</sup> It is this seemingly “harmless icon” who has too often been commemorated and whose praises have been sung by all and sundry, including shameless, hypocritical, careerist New Labour politicians in Britain.<sup>22</sup> Something of the paradox of the veteran socialist James was well captured by the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson in “Di Good Life,” his eloquent tribute to the “wise ole shephad”: “Some sey him is a sage but nobody really know him riteful age ar whe him come from.”<sup>23</sup> This book aims

to not just advance general understanding about the “wise ole shephad” but also help answer the question of “whe him come from.”

### **C. L. R. James in 1930s Britain: Image and Reality**

If, as art historian David Craven once noted of James, “few defining figures of the 20th century are as famous and as unknown,” then there can be few areas of his life where he is both more famous and yet more unknown as the six years he spent in Britain, from 1932 to 1938.<sup>24</sup> In 1981, in an outstanding article on this period of James’s life, Robert Hill wrote that “in order that the full stature of James’s actual accomplishments may be settled and recognized from the outset, it would be best to simply itemize them.” The following is a list of just the main achievements and activity, adapted and updated from that provided by Hill in 1981:

1. Author of *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (1933), an abridgement of *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies* (1932)
2. Ghostwriter for Learie Constantine’s *Cricket and I* (1933), cricket reporter for the *Manchester Guardian* (1933–35), and author of a weekly column on “English cricket” for the *Glasgow Herald* (1937–38)
3. Executive member of the League of Coloured Peoples, 1933–34, chair of the International African Friends of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), 1935–36, executive member of the International African Service Bureau (IASB), 1937–38, with primary responsibility as editorial director of *Africa and the World* (1937) and *International African Opinion* (1938)
4. Playwright, writing *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (1934), a play about the leader of the Haitian Revolution, performed by the Stage Society in London’s Westminster Theatre in 1936 and starring Paul Robeson in the title role
5. Author of *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937)
6. Chair of the Finchley branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), 1935–36, chair of the Marxist Group and editor of *Fight and Workers’ Fight* (1936–38), International Executive Committee member of the Fourth International, 1938

7. Author of *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938)

8. Author of *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938)

9. English translator of Boris Souvarine's biography *Stalin* (1939).<sup>25</sup>

As Hill explains,

All this was done between March 1932 and October 1938, when he sailed for the United States, a period of just over six and a half years. In method it meant prodigious effort and concentration; in measurement, the results were prolific and gave example of the man's tremendous diversity of interest and capacities; in consequence, it touched all corners of the world-wide revolutionary struggle. . . . By anyone's standards, it was a monumental achievement, which staggers the mind simply in the re-counting of it.<sup>26</sup>

Yet while the significance of the monumental achievement itself can never be dismissed completely, one inevitable consequence of the paucity of serious historical research about this period of James's life is that the dominant image left by both recent popular biographies and some scholarly studies is that he was essentially a would-be bourgeois dilettante playing around with Marxist ideas while living the high life as a feted writer.<sup>27</sup> For St Louis, James "was unable to privilege the materiality of political praxis over the ideality of cultural and intellectual life."<sup>28</sup> Even Scott McLemee can write that before James came to America in 1938, he was not a "professional revolutionist" who saw Lenin and Trotsky as "chief influences" but a "man of letters (on the model of William Hazlitt or Arnold Bennett)." The move to America was thus more than "a 'turn' in James's career." It marked "a profound shift in the co-ordinates of his personal identity."<sup>29</sup>

One would have thought such arguments would rest on a considerable amount of evidence. In fact, they appear to rest almost entirely on one sentence in the testimony of one man, James's publisher from 1936 to 1938, Fredric Warburg. Warburg's testimony, written during the 1950s when a member of the CIA-funded British Society for Cultural Freedom, though well known, remains worth quoting nonetheless:

James himself was one of the most delightful and easy-going personalities I have known, colourful in more senses than one. A dark-skinned West Indian Negro from Trinidad, he stood six feet three inches in his



socks and was noticeably good-looking. His memory was extraordinary. He could quote, not only passages from the Marxist classics but long extracts from Shakespeare, in a soft lilting English which was a delight to hear. Immensely amiable, he loved the flesh-pots of capitalism, fine cooking, fine clothes, fine furniture and beautiful women, without a trace of the guilty remorse to be expected from a seasoned warrior of the class war.<sup>30</sup>

The last, particularly evocative sentence about James's love for the flesh-pots of capitalism is the critical one, and the authority given to this assertion by even some of the most dedicated James scholars is quite remarkable. McLemee, for example, describes Warburg's testimony as "the most vivid portrait of James during the 1930s," showing him to be not simply "a revolutionary" but "a gentleman."<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that Warburg was not totally misrepresenting James, as he *did* of course love fine cooking, fine clothes, fine furniture, and beautiful women (including, it seems, Warburg's wife, Pamela de Bayou). After signing with publishers Secker and Warburg in 1936, James would spend odd weekends away at the Warburgs' cottage, near West Hoathly, in Sussex, where, as Warburg remembers, "politics were forgotten" and no doubt James did take advantage of the finer things in life. Yet what needs to be remembered is that beautiful women aside, and they should of course be separated from a depiction of the fleshpots of capitalism, James's access to such things during this period was rather limited.

As Warburg himself noted, James's work covering cricket meant "it was only between April and October that he was in funds."<sup>32</sup> As for "fine clothes," one comrade of James's in the early British Trotskyist movement, Louise Cripps — another beautiful (and also married) woman with whom he had a relationship during the 1930s — remembered his clothing was "unnoticeable," usually "a medium-priced, medium-coloured suit, white shirt, and darkish tie. . . . He never wore flamboyant colours. They were a dull sort of clothes. I had often thought that he must have deliberately changed from the lighter clothes of the tropics to ones reflecting the sober greys of England's rainy climate."<sup>33</sup> When James left for America, in 1938, he remembered that Learie Constantine took one look at his "literary-political grey flannels and sports jacket" and decided it was necessary to buy him a new suit. "You cannot go to the United States that way. . . . It wouldn't do."<sup>34</sup> As for fine furniture, Cripps has described the first time she visited

James's top-floor central London flat on 9 Heathcote Street, where he lived for several years beginning in 1934:

We walked up a couple of flights of stairs, and when we went, we found a medium-sized room with a fairly large window looking out onto the street. The room was moderately large, about twenty feet by sixteen feet. The walls had once been a cream colour. Now with age there were tinges of green and brown, not exactly unpleasant, but not in any way a bright room. Short old curtains hung at the windows, curtains that had turned grey with age. . . . There was no fireplace, but a gas heater had been installed. It was operated by putting a shilling into a meter. . . . There was also a single plate heater on a small stool. It was also coin-operated and allowed James to make tea. There was a kettle settled permanently on it. The only other fixture in the room was a small cupboard in which James kept a can of Carnation milk, Lipton's tea, and tins of biscuits. . . . It was not an attractive room, and James had done nothing to brighten it. He seemed quite content with the way it looked. There were no pictures on the wall, framed reproductions, not any photographs at all. . . . On the floor was well-worn brown Linoleum. There was a good deal of dust in the room . . . [but] not much furniture. . . . The major piece was the large round table where everyone sat. There was also a divan in one corner and a small bookcase. But books were not confined to that small space. There were books everywhere: books up the walls, books on the floor, books and papers on the table.<sup>35</sup>

A multitude of books aside, James in this period was not first and foremost a literary or cultural man of letters, at least not on the traditional English model. This is not to say that James neglected cultural matters. Warburg's portrait of James omits any mention of not only his anti-imperialist play *Toussaint Louverture*, but also the importance for black, radical, anti-colonialist activists of developing their own alternative counterculture of resistance in the imperial metropolis alongside more directly political anti-colonial campaigning in Pan-Africanist organizations like the IASB. One of James's friends and comrades in this struggle was the Jamaican Pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey, the former wife of Marcus Garvey and cofounder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Amy Ashwood was also a playwright (and theater producer) who had taken her shows across America and the Caribbean in the 1920s, and since moving to London had, in 1934, investigated the possibility of taking a com-



**FIGURE INTRO.1** Amy Ashwood Garvey, 1940s.

pany of artists of African descent to the West Coast of Africa. When this plan fell through, she and her partner, the Trinidadian musician and actor Sam Manning, first opened the International Afro Restaurant in 1935, at 62 New Oxford Street, and then in 1936, with the Guyanese clarinetist Rudolph Dunbar, opened a nightclub nearby. The Florence Mills Social Parlour, on London's Carnaby Street, named in tribute to the black American actress, quickly became "a haunt of black intellectuals."<sup>36</sup> Delia Jarrett-Macauley gives a vivid sense of the importance of such centers in 1930s London, noting "a steady stream of black artists was trickling into Britain." "They brought jazz, they brought blues. . . . In the evenings artists, activists, students drank and supped and kept their spirits high at Amy Ashwood Garvey's West End restaurant." James himself recalled that Amy Ashwood was "a wonderful cook" and "if you were lucky, the 78s of Trinidadian calypsonian Sam Manning, Amy's partner, spun late into the night."<sup>37</sup> In London, Manning, who headed the West Indian Rhythm Boys band, put

on black British musical and comic revues with “singers and actors from Liverpool, Cardiff and the West Indies.”<sup>38</sup>

It was not that James was not offered the opportunity to become a writer full time. He later recalled how his “publisher’s wife,” Pamela de Bayou, “a wonderful woman . . . begged [him] almost with tears to settle down and write.” James recounted his response: “I said NO. . . . A fine sight I would have been with two or three books or a play or two to my credit and hanging around the political world, as all these other writers do, treating as amateurs, what is the most serious business in the world today.”<sup>39</sup>

Rather, as Warburg remembers of James, “politics was his religion and Marx his god,” and not only could he recite “passages from the Marxist classics” from memory but as a tireless propagandist for Trotskyism “he was brave.” Warburg recalls James’s activism: “Night after night he would address meetings in London and the provinces, denouncing the crimes of the blood-thirsty Stalin. . . . If you told him of some new communist argument, he would listen with a smile of infinite tolerance on his dark face, wag the index finger of his right hand solemnly, and announce in an understanding tone—‘we know them, we know them.’”<sup>40</sup> The theme running through the testimony from almost all of those who knew James during the 1930s—both in the British Trotskyist movement and outside it—only confirms just how seriously he took revolutionary politics. Charlie van Gelderen, a veteran of the British Trotskyist movement, for example, thought James “quickly grasped” the “essentials” of Marxism, and overall “enriched Marxist theory with original ideas.”<sup>41</sup> For what it is worth, even the British government’s Special Branch agents noted on January 18, 1937, that James was “a fluent speaker and [appeared] to be very well versed in the doctrines of Karl Marx and other revolutionary writers.”<sup>42</sup> As Kent Worcester judged in his still unsurpassed biography of James, published in 1996, “There was nothing dilettantish about his commitment to Trotskyism.”<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps one of the best-known incidents relating to James’s time in Britain came when he was invited to take Sunday afternoon tea at the home of the young, socialist, feminist novelist Ethel Mannin, a “determined collector of ‘interesting people.’”<sup>44</sup> Her husband, the anti-imperialist writer Reginald Reynolds, remembers Mannin “had long hoped to meet C. L. R. James, whose intellect and good looks were praised by all except the Stalinists.”<sup>45</sup> Mannin unfortunately did not know that James found the English custom of taking Sunday afternoon tea tiresome. As James put it, “Fidgeting about with tea cups and bits of cake, and saying how many lumps I

took, and all that sort of business bored me stiff.”<sup>46</sup> Mannin’s satirical novel written in 1945, *Comrade O Comrade*, describes how an “extremely handsome young Negro” and “eminent Trotskyist” avoided making small talk when the character loosely modeled on Mannin herself asked if he took “sugar” or wanted “cake” or “more tea.” Instead, James apparently arrived at her home near Wimbledon Common, Oak Cottage, engrossed in a deep political discussion with a fellow Trotskyist, a discussion the two never apparently abandoned during the hour they were there. While admitting that others present were “hypnotized” by James’s “dark rich beautiful voice,” which “flowed like music,” Mannin subsequently found it easy enough to satirize “the non-stop Trotskyists who came to tea,” using quotes from James’s *World Revolution* to reconstruct their thoughts on matters ranging from the French Popular Front, Spain, and Ethiopia, to “the real nature of Imperialism,” and their stress throughout about how “Permanent Revolution and International Socialism must form the basis of all revolutionary strategy.”<sup>47</sup>

Probably the most common criticism from those outside the Trotskyist movement who knew James during this period was not at all that he was too involved with literary and cultural matters, to the detriment of his political understanding—rather, quite the reverse. As Reynolds put it in his memoir, *My Life and Crimes* (1956), while James was “a man of brilliant intellect and an excellent writer[;] . . . unfortunately he turned his back on the problems of his own people—and also on the much broader cultural interests for which his talents suited him so admirably—to follow the barren cult of Trotskyism.”<sup>48</sup> Even this statement bears examination, for Reynolds would have known that in 1930s Britain James had not “turned his back on the problems of his own people” after becoming a Trotskyist but was a leading campaigner in solidarity with the Caribbean labor rebellions, and an important Pan-Africanist more generally, an aspect of his thought that both he and Mannin greatly admired. And while it seems unlikely that Reynolds saw Paul Robeson star in the title role of *Toussaint Louverture*, Mannin’s interest in Robeson alone meant they would have known about it. It is partly because Reynolds knew of James’s sterling anticolonial work and close connection to cultural life in Britain during the 1930s, epitomized by his professional work as a leading cricket correspondent, that he felt his subsequent career after leaving Britain for the world of American Trotskyism—about which we can presume he knew very little—had been a waste,

James having apparently neglected his “broader cultural interests” to follow a “barren cult.”

One perhaps might also note the shift in Reynolds’s politics that had taken place by the 1950s, which were a far cry from the 1930s, when he had cut a distinctive figure on the British far Left. In 1929, aged just twenty-four, as a young middle-class Quaker, Reynolds had traveled to India, met Gandhi, and returned to Britain a hardened anti-imperialist and champion of Indian nationalism who was to be one of Gandhi’s leading English supporters. In 1932 Reynolds’s militant Gandhism won him the position of general secretary of the No More War Movement before he also steadily radicalized politically, supporting the ILP and breaking from pacifism and Gandhism during the Spanish Civil War. He once noted, tongue in cheek, that he was so left-wing in the 1930s that he “could see Trotskyism at some distance to [his] right.” His sense of humor meant that one friend thought he was rather like a character out of a P. G. Wodehouse novel, “a sort of Bertie Wooster, if you can imagine a Wooster who was a radical revolutionary.” The high point of Reynolds’s “revolutionary radicalism” came in 1937 with *The White Sahibs in India*, a superb historical indictment of British colonialism that carried an appreciative foreword from Nehru. Yet as Reynolds’s biographer notes, “After the Second World War, Reg’s disillusionment with politics was complete,” and he drifted back to his early concern with Gandhi and Quakerism.<sup>49</sup> Yet there was never a chance that James would neglect his “broader cultural interests.” In 1982 James sat for a portrait by the artist Paul Harber, son of Denzil Dean Harber, another veteran of the early British Trotskyist movement. During the sittings, James remarked, “Besides revolutionaries, there are two other lots of people I admire — artists and wicket-keepers.”<sup>50</sup>

### **The Aim of This Work**

In 1981, Robert Hill stressed the importance of the years James spent in 1930s Britain to James’s overall intellectual development, describing the profound political transformation that took place as “a leap out of the world of Thackeray and nineteenth-century intellectual concerns into the world of international socialist revolution.” But Hill also suggested that a “great deal of further research” on this period of James’s life was necessary: “It would be trying to reach for the impossible if we sought after a com-

plete description of James's evolution over this pivotal six-year stretch in England. Many separate histories are bound up together in each stage of the work, and each would separately necessitate a great deal of further research. In addition, it would alike be too much to attempt an exhaustive analysis of each work."<sup>51</sup>

Though Hill was writing in 1981, and in an article of only twenty pages, this book will not pretend to offer "a complete description of James's evolution over this pivotal six-year stretch" either. Though James was perhaps the critical intellectual driving force of early British Trotskyism, this study will not itself detail his relationship and activism in that movement or the full complexities and subtleties of his early Marxism. Nor will it "attempt an exhaustive analysis of each work" of James's written during this period, some of which, particularly *The Black Jacobins*, deserve and demand whole books devoted to them. While Hill's article was entitled "In England, 1932–1938," this study will also have as its main focus the work James did in England, and only touch in passing on his visits to France, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.<sup>52</sup> That said, this book is based on a detailed examination of several of the "many separate histories bound up in each stage" of James's life during this "pivotal" period, using new sources that have recently come to light, including the Special Branch file kept on him. We will begin by examining James's early identification with imperial British culture while growing up in colonial Trinidad, and his creative use as a young, Caribbean, literary intellectual of the Victorian cultural critic Matthew Arnold in the cause of West Indian nationalism. We will then closely detail the critical ten months that the young Trinidadian writer spent in "Red Nelson," in Lancashire, soon after his move to Britain, and his first encounter with the English working-class movement. A lengthy chapter will follow, examining James's turn to revolutionary politics, and how his Marxism and militant Pan-Africanism manifested itself in anticolonial agitation and anticapitalist activism in the imperial metropolis. We will then turn to James's relationship with metropolitan imperial culture in Britain through a study of his professional work as a cricket reporter. The work will conclude with a discussion of what are perhaps James's finest works during this period, his inspiring invocations of the spirit of the Haitian Revolution through both drama and history, *Toussaint Louverture* and *The Black Jacobins*.

In all of this, the initial pioneering biographical work of scholars such as Paul Buhle and Kent Worcester on this period of James's life, together with the other advances that have been made over the past decades of

James scholarship, and on imperialism, race, and resistance more generally, again deserve recognition and acknowledgment. For example, in March 1932, after arriving in London, James had taken residence in the district of Bloomsbury, then “still the Mecca of suburban and provincial intellectuals,” according to Reginald Reynolds.<sup>53</sup> While James only stayed for ten weeks, until May 1932, he sent his “first impressions” of London back home to be published (in five parts) in the *Port of Spain Gazette*. These essays allow scholars a unique and fascinating glimpse into James’s “voyage in” and his mentality at the point of arrival in Britain, and in 2003 many of them were republished in a well-received collection entitled *Letters from London*, with an introduction by Kenneth Ramchand.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, this study might be seen as attempting to evoke a detailed and historical sense of the totality of critical aspects of James’s life and work in Britain, explicitly rejecting the fragmented and decentered approach of much recent scholarship. Worcester has suggested that we can construct such a concrete totality of James’s life if we accept that “no one problematic — Marxism, black nationalism, West Indian history and culture, and so on — can be used by itself.”<sup>55</sup> However, only one “problematic” he lists has any intrinsic interest in explaining the totality of anyone’s life and work, the Marxist method that James himself used to construct his great biographical portrait of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture in *The Black Jacobins*. There is also perhaps one other way this study might be said to aspire to be “Jamesian.” As Paul Le Blanc has noted, “An essential aspect of James’s method is to make links between seemingly diverse realities, sometimes to take something that is commonly perceived as marginal and to demonstrate that it is central. This is done in a manner that profoundly alters (rather than displaces) the traditionally ‘central’ categories.”<sup>56</sup> This book aims, through a careful historical examination of a particular past reality, one currently perceived as marginal and peripheral, to alter our traditional understanding of what is of central importance about the life and work of James.

C. L. R. James’s sojourn in imperial Britain in the 1930s deserves a place in history, and not simply because as an outstanding black West Indian intellectual and anticolonial activist he made a tremendous contribution to helping forge the rise of modern multicultural, “postcolonial” Britain. To borrow a metaphor from his beloved world of cricket, James was also one of the great “opening batsmen” of the international Trotskyist movement. Yet in racking up the runs at the expense of racism, imperialism, fas-