

Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire

Jeffrey Hill



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Preface

It was my father who first introduced me to Learie Constantine – not in the flesh, that is, but through some of the many stories that did the rounds in Lancashire seventy and more years ago. He had watched ‘Connie’ at Seedhill in the 1930s and had himself played a few games for Nelson in the early years of the 1939–45 War. I recall his showing me a wristwatch he had bought himself from the proceeds of a collection for taking three catches from fierce drives in a Lancashire League match. One of them might have dismissed Winston Place, but my Dad was something of a romancer, so it might not. By this time Constantine had left Nelson Cricket Club, and the cricketer who my father most admired was not Constantine but his successor at Nelson, Lala Amarnath. Lala was a fine player, and a bit of a rebel who had fallen foul of his team’s management during the Indians’ tour of England in 1936. But he never acquired the legendary status of Constantine. No one did. Connie had after all been at Nelson for nine seasons. He was an institution in the League. Like all cricket geniuses he was fallible. He could disappoint, but there were times he did things nobody else could match. Though a fearsome fast bowler and a punishing hitter as a batsman, Constantine was best remembered for his skills as a fielder. In his youth, in the Caribbean of the mid-1920s, he had reached heights at cover point that were scaled in later years only by such marvels in that position as Colin Bland, Clive Lloyd and Derek Randall. He was that good – ‘electric heels’ they called him in his early days at Nelson. By his mid-thirties his preference was for close fielding. His shrewd anticipation and lightning hand-eye reflexes were responsible for some extraordinary catches and run outs. It was around this particular attribute that the Constantine stories were fashioned. The basic one is that Constantine would catch a ball close to the wicket when everyone else on the ground, players and spectators alike, were looking to the boundary to see where the ball had crossed the rope: but all the time it was in Constantine’s pocket, from which after a brief hiatus he would produce it, as the conjurer produces the rabbit from a hat.

For the first five or six years of my life, my family lived no more than a short bus ride from Constantine’s house in Nelson. He kept his home there until 1949, when he moved to London. At that point my contact with him became distant. His book *Colour Bar* was too serious for me in 1954, though I was aware of it.

Trinidad politics, in which Constantine was immersed for the next eight years, were likewise too arcane a subject in my teenage years. But I became reacquainted with him on his return to England in 1962, and as an undergraduate was pleased to read in my *New Statesman* that he had been at the Old Trafford test in 1963, when Frank Worrell's West Indians defeated England by a considerable margin.¹ Just before this, he had appeared on the television as the subject of 'This Is Your Life', a show that upset Nelsonians by giving too little attention to Constantine's association with the town. The neglect seemed wrong. For many, Nelson *was* Constantine, just as Constantine owed so much personally to the town. He died in 1971, but that was not the end of his story. For me it continued when I started doing research on the politics and popular culture of north-west England; Constantine kept cropping up in one guise or another in my reading. Some people suggested that I might write about him, and I did produce various bits and pieces; but there was a fine biography by Gerald Howat that came out in the mid-1970s, and later on an equally good one by Peter Mason, and these seemed to say most that needed to be said. But, perhaps, not quite all. There was a mass of detail in various archives that had not yet been quarried. Much of it related to Constantine's non-cricketing life. It told not just of the man but of the circumstances in which he lived; of Constantine as a marker of historical change, especially in matters of race. It seemed worth a shot.

Constantine

This is a book about what was arguably the foremost social problem of the twentieth century, and which continues to challenge twenty-first-century minds: race and race relations. The focus of the book falls upon a man whose entire life was shaped by race, and who, in part because of his championing of race equality, achieved an eminence that few men or women of colour were able to experience during his time in history.

Learie Nicholas Constantine was born in colonial Trinidad in 1901.¹ He died in London in 1971. The contrast between these two dates is startling, in both personal and historical terms. Constantine was the first-born son of black parents who, though by no means well off, might just have been regarded as part of an indigenous lower middle class. His paternal great-grandfather, however, had been a slave, while Constantine's mother, Anaise Pascall, was the daughter of slaves. By the time of his own death, their eldest son Learie was a highly respected member of the British establishment. The historian Anne Spry Rush has placed him as 'upper middle-class', a status that might flatter his financial position but suitably captures his social standing.² Having made his name as a cricketer, and been honoured as a Member of the British Empire (MBE) for his work as a British civil servant during the Second World War, by the early 1960s he had received a knighthood, and from 1969 sat in the House of Lords. He was a member of the Inns of Court and served on the Race Relations Board, the Sports Council and the Board of Governors of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In recognition of the part he fulfilled in the independence movement of the country of his birth, he had been appointed High Commissioner in London of Trinidad and Tobago. In addition he might even be regarded as a 'public intellectual', at least in matters of race and race relations. Alongside various pieces of journalism and broadcasting that Constantine had contributed over the years, there were nine books, mostly on cricket but in one case a publication that added significantly to the British post-war discourse on race – *Colour Bar*, published in 1954. All of this qualified him

for that exclusive, if informal, club of 'the great and the good'. He had acquired an international celebrity. If perhaps not a household name he was certainly very well known. In his lifetime Constantine bridged several worlds: colonial and metropolitan, local and national, working class and middle class, black and white. Constantine's success in a climate of racial prejudice and hostility appears both exceptional and praiseworthy. In contrast to most black people of his era, some of them well-loved sportsmen, his is a history of impressive mobility, crossing geographical, social, cultural and racial boundaries.³

I

From the late 1940s onwards the migration of black people to Britain exercised what was probably the most profound effect on British identity of the later twentieth century. Those West Indians who arrived in the mother country just after the Second World War did not see themselves as 'migrants'; they were simply British subjects, switching from one imperial territory to another. As the Trinidadian writer and broadcaster Trevor McDonald has pointed out, going to England was seen as 'going to the *centre*.'⁴ Yet while the West Indies migrants with their British passports saw themselves as genuinely British subjects, the reception they experienced from white residents on arrival in Britain suggested something quite different. To many they were not welcome; they were not 'British'. The newcomers were seen as 'strangers', their dark skins and supposed cultural otherness marking them out from what were assumed to be the norms of British life. These norms, it was thought, were to be found in a sense of Britain as a country distinguished essentially by its 'whiteness'.⁵ Although the numbers of immigrants were not particularly high initially, around 2,000 from the Caribbean in 1953, they had quickly come to be seen as presenting a 'problem'.⁶ Communities of black people had long existed in certain towns, notably Cardiff and Liverpool, but it was with the concentration of the post-war migrants in London, the capital city – in Brixton and Notting Hill especially – that the question of race really came into national prominence. From this emerged a new problematic: how to define and, if possible, cohere the 'races'. Thus the idea of 'race relations' entered the vocabulary of public life and produced a succession of investigations into the problem.⁷

Learie Constantine was present at the birth of this enterprise. Relatively little attention had been directed in the past to scrutinizing the black communities. The perceived problems posed by the immigrant had been focused chiefly on

Irish and Jewish groups, against both of which there was ample and deep-rooted animosity; but for both groups there had over time been a degree of assimilation with indigenous peoples. In his work as a welfare officer in Liverpool during the Second World War, Constantine became immersed in the experiences of a small contingent of West Indian voluntary workers, mostly Jamaican, who provided an almost laboratory case study of race relations in a large city. It was for Constantine a quite new experience of racial division, different in tone and situation from his colonial days. While in Liverpool, as in Trinidad, race relations were part of an existing class structure of rich and poor, in Liverpool race also figured far more actively *within* classes: that is to say, there was no equivalent in Trinidad to a working class divided between black and white. Although no detailed academic analysis of race relations on Merseyside appeared until Anthony Richmond's study of 1954,⁸ Constantine had imbibed much from his own dealings with white people, and also from what he observed in the treatment of other people of colour in areas such as employment, housing and leisure. He was among the first to direct the public's mind to the 'colour bar',⁹ the term he used as the title of the book he brought out in 1954.¹⁰ Its appearance was doubly remarkable. It was exceptional not only in its authorship – a former professional cricketer, and a black one at that, but also in making a statement, in a direct and readable form, about race problems in Britain and other parts of the world. Constantine did not hold back. Though the book had many failings, it did not shrink from delivering some harsh criticisms of contemporary attitudes and practices on race prejudice and discrimination. Unlike the academic studies of race that appeared around this time, *Colour Bar* had a populist tone that rendered it accessible to a general readership. It was well suited to expanding its readership and message through the serialization it underwent in sections of the tabloid press.

Constantine was, then, among the first in the field on the topic of race relations. Given his public status in the early 1950s, he might have risen to a position of some influence in this area, but for two things: shortly after the publication of *Colour Bar* he left England to work in Trinidad and was absent from British debate on race questions for some eight years; further, his early initiatives were overtaken by a cadre of academic sociologists and anthropologists who consolidated their position as experts on race questions during the 1950s. Anthony Richmond, Ruth Glass, Michael Banton, Sheila Patterson and especially Kenneth Little, who had spearheaded academic studies of race in Britain in the late 1940s, took the lead.¹¹ As Chris Waters has it, 'these experts secured their status as an authoritative voice on matters of race in Britain, monopolizing control over a relatively new domain of knowledge.'¹²

What their monopoly resulted in was a discourse on race distinguished by a new methodology in which two notions stood out. First, in an attempt to understand race, analysts tended to work with a model of separate and fixed groups, indigenous (white) and newcomer (black) or as they were often described, 'hosts and strangers'. It had the effect of ascribing singular characteristics to each group and of giving to the 'hosts' the normative standards from which the 'strangers' were deemed to depart. From this followed a second notion, with important implications for public policy: that of 'assimilation' – the absorption of the strangers into the lifestyle of the hosts. The more flexible 'multiculturalism' – which for all its practical flaws nonetheless moved away from the assumption that to assimilate meant becoming more like 'us' – was still some way in the future. But at least the race relations project of the 1950s was an attempt to seek answers to 'race' that were not confined simply to limiting immigration. Constantine himself was profoundly influenced at the time, and in the years to come, by this new science of race relations and its idea of assimilation. And it was not only Constantine who was influenced by it; assimilation for a while was the conceptual framework in which many people in Britain thought about race relations. Assimilation melted away from the 1970s onwards when challenged by new formulations of black identity and by the enduring power of whiteness.

Few of those who in the twenty-first century study race conceive of it any longer in biological terms. Some indeed have sought to dispense with the term 'race' altogether, although this is perhaps an unhelpful move to the extent that it loosens a grasp on identities and relationships that are actually perceived, rightly or wrongly, by many people.¹³ There is, as Karl Spracklen has pointed out, a 'taken-for-grantedness' about racial difference.¹⁴ Most commentators on race now apply the term to social and cultural constructions of identity, but this is not to say that the value of race as an explanatory tool in social analysis has been overtaken by 'class', 'ethnicity', 'nation' or whatever else. In the later work of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, we find race very much to the fore as a marker of identity, a 'discursive construct', a 'sliding signifier', 'the centrepiece of a hierarchical system that produces differences'.¹⁵ Hall perceives a residual presence of race: 'The physical or biological trace, having been shown out of the front door, tends to sidle around the edge of the verandah and climb back in through the pantry window!'¹⁶ One body of recent writings on race typifies this persistent presence very clearly. It is what I might call the 'whiteness turn' in race studies that has flourished in the United States, particularly since the 1990s. It does not, as the term whiteness might suggest, attempt to champion white supremacy, though it can deal with the sentiments and anxieties of those who

do. The slogans articulated at Donald Trump rallies during the 2016 American presidential election campaign – the constant refrain of ‘Make America Great Again’ and the less noticed but more sinister ‘Make Race Great Again’ – are a vivid example of such thinking. They draw upon a still common American belief in white superiority, an ingrained collective refusal to acknowledge that the Civil War and subsequent campaigns to establish civil rights and to pass into a ‘post-racial age’ have erased the ‘fact’ of white supremacy.¹⁷ Whiteness studies encompass a variety of academic disciplines and seek to explain the phenomenon of whiteness as it is manifested in people’s thought and behaviour and even in the configuration of the built environment.

Whiteness is not an easy idea to grapple with and can become a rather slippery conceptual pathway. For this reason it has been criticized for what have been seen as methodological and definitional weaknesses inherent to the idea.¹⁸ But what it has importantly achieved is a switch of emphasis in race studies away from a focus on simply black or brown groups and opened up a wider spectrum of study, including the intriguing notion of degrees of whiteness. It therefore takes something that has previously seemed self-evident and makes it problematical. It dispenses with a plain black and white ‘racial’ opposition and delves into the issue of how at different times immigrants of various kinds – Jews, Irish, Italians, East Europeans, African Caribbeans – have come to be seen as worthy, or not, of white status.¹⁹ The central concern of whiteness studies appears to be the process by which ‘white’ has become established in many societies as the pre-eminent ideology. Katharine Tyler’s work on British Asians amplifies this point profoundly. She argues that British Asians are represented in the ‘white hegemonic imagination’ as ‘racialised immigrants’ standing betwixt and between, neither ‘us’ nor ‘them.’²⁰ Similarly, in his work on the American academic and black civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Anthony Appiah has remarked that, in the early twentieth century, Du Bois had never been in a place where what it meant to be black wasn’t defined by whites.²¹ While the concept of whiteness as it is presently articulated was unknown to Constantine, and to others in his time, the power to define and construct racial and ethnic inequality was not. His life history therefore helps to unravel some of that whiteness knot.

II

Constantine’s life also connects aptly with another new and burgeoning academic field – Atlantic Studies. It aims to plot the cross currents of ideas and movements

that make up an Atlantic network. 'Transatlantic history (re-)evaluates the flow and circulation of people, goods, and ideas, within and across the continents surrounding the Atlantic basin between the fifteenth century and the present.'²² Such a focus represents a convergence of previous forms of thematic and area studies – Caribbean, North American, European and postcolonial. Its broad multidisciplinary range includes economic, political, social and cultural forces. An important concern in this book, then, is to examine through the experiences of Learie Constantine the formation and development of relationships in these various contexts.

Among a number of important writers on this subject the influence of one, Paul Gilroy, is particularly noteworthy.²³ Gilroy's understanding of the 'Black Atlantic' brings together the various influences that have affected people, especially black people, across the Atlantic basin. For Gilroy the concept of a Black Atlantic does not denote simply a geographical area, though that in itself would be a useful framework of analysis. By employing the concept Gilroy's purpose seems more complex and ambitious: to challenge both a dominant Eurocentrism that had become established in academic sociology, and an Anglocentric nationalism that was evident in the newer forms of cultural studies emerging towards the close of the twentieth century; further, to interrogate the ways in which the concept of race has been used as an analytical tool; to cast doubt on notions of 'nationalism' and 'ethnicity' as fixed, essentialized categories; and to emphasize the element of flux in all things bearing on ideas and identity – 'the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade'.²⁴ Cultures, for Gilroy, are the product of an inter-mixing of historical traditions and contacts. It is in the region of the Atlantic, Gilroy insists, where we should seek to understand what we might describe as a black experience.

A recurring motif, then, in my discussion of Constantine is the geographical and cultural framework of Constantine's life and work: the constant movement within countries and between continents with which he became so familiar. From a twenty-first century perspective we might see Constantine as an early version of 'globalized' man. In a conversation with his daughter, Gloria Valere, in which I suggested that this book would be a 'transatlantic history', she reminded me that her father spent at least half of his life in England. The point is well made. Constantine himself was apt to describe Nelson in Lancashire, where he and his family lived for twenty years, as 'home', and a good case can be made for him, purely in the sense of residence, as a 'black Englishman'. Constantine often used this term in relation not only to his own position but to that of West Indians generally, especially those who had come to live in England after the

Second World War The phrase suggests that the longevity of his time in England might have erased at least some of his Caribbean inheritance. I argue, however, that enough of it remained, and that it did so because he himself perpetuated it in various ways – through his writings, his stance on cricket, his work in race relations and through the contacts he maintained with Trinidad. As a cricketer he spent most of his career in England, but made frequent journeys back and forth across the Atlantic as a player and later a reporter on cricket. His political and diplomatic roles amplified this world presence, intellectually if not always physically. His daughter has told the story that when Constantine accompanied the prime minister of Trinidad, Eric Williams, to meet Jawaharlal Nehru on a goodwill tour to India in the late 1950s, thousands lined the streets: it was Constantine, the great cricketer, the people had turned up to see – few, if any, had heard of Williams.²⁵ As a wartime civil servant, Constantine was positioned at a key point in an Atlantic nexus, serving West Indian technicians who had volunteered to work in war production in England, and who were regarded by the British authorities as temporary residents destined to return to the Caribbean with new skills that would be put to the service of their country's own post-war development. In fact, many of them stayed put, becoming immigrants who brought new cultures to the mother country. They (and Constantine too, for he was not an exception to this) carried with them throughout their lives ideas that were the product of *Atlantic*, not simply English, experiences. The idea of the Black Atlantic provides therefore a transnational framework for a black culture formed of movements and ideas circulating across continents – to produce what Gilroy calls a 'double consciousness', a term borrowed from W. E. B. Du Bois.²⁶ Stuart Hall has placed this concept in his own 'diasporic experience' as a Jamaican academic in Britain attempting to come to terms with the juxtaposition of a black Caribbean heritage and an English lived culture – 'belonging to more than one world, of being both "here" and "there", of thinking about "there" from "here" and vice versa; of being "at home" – but never wholly – in both places; neither fundamentally the same, nor totally different.'²⁷

This perspective provides a particularly appropriate way of thinking about the life's journey of Learie Constantine. Connecting with it is the life of another figure, the Trinidadian radical C. L. R. James (1901–1989), an exact contemporary of Constantine, born but a few miles from him, and who also spent much of his life away from his native land, in the United States and Britain, interspersed with visits to West Africa and back again to Trinidad. He became a leading figure in the transatlantic Left, a man of multiple talents and astonishing intellectual energy who contributed in so many ways to Marxism, Caribbean

history, the study of literature, Pan-Africanism and the understanding of the role of sport in society. If we are seeking an embodiment of the Black Atlantic, there could be few finer examples than James. His influence in politics and political ideas was certainly greater than that of Constantine, especially if measured in literary output, though curiously it was to Constantine that James attributed the awakening of his own radicalism in the early 1930s. The two men knew each other from childhood. James had been a cricketer of some quality as a young man in Trinidad, and remained among the keenest followers and observers of the game throughout his life. In his famous book *Beyond a Boundary*²⁸ he credited Constantine, through his cricket, with a seminal role in the creation of a nationalist consciousness in the West Indies. Indeed, it is through the pages of *Beyond a Boundary* that we have become most familiar with the impact of Constantine in his early Trinidad days.

Constantine and James were not, of course, alone in experiencing this movement across an ocean. Hundreds of thousands of people had been doing so since the sixteenth century, most of them as slaves. The creation of an Atlantic trading empire from the sixteenth century onwards was the work of several European nations, with Spain, Portugal, Britain and France taking the lead. It was fundamental to the prosperity enjoyed by these nations, which later shared in the intellectual movements often described as the 'Enlightenment'. Slavery and Reason were the two sides of the coin of Western development at this time. By the eighteenth century the British occupied the primary position in the Atlantic economy and had, as James Walvin points out, shipped vast numbers of black Africans as slaves to the Caribbean and North America.²⁹ And, Walvin further and crucially reminds us, this was a movement of peoples that continued to affect Britain economically, socially and culturally long after the ending of the institution of slavery, especially when in the middle years of the twentieth century the direction of the migration swung towards Britain itself, creating a significant minority population of black people in many British cities. The slave trade and the complex Atlantic diaspora it created must therefore be seen as part of the fabric – 'the warp and the weft' in Walvin's term³⁰ – of British history itself, not simply an offshore event. It left many legacies. The overriding one was racism. Long after slavery itself had disappeared in British dominions, black people were left to contend with the status of racial inferiority that past economic servitude and a continuing psychology of 'white superiority' had dealt them. Learie Constantine shouldered such burdens with some success, but his life also helps to illustrate why many did not.

III

Accounts of Constantine's life are numerous. There are several short descriptions,³¹ and Constantine himself frequently introduced biographical fragments in his own books.³² Greater depth is offered by Udine Giuseppe's useful overview of Constantine's achievements.³³ More especially there are two biographies of fuller length. Gerald Howat's study, published shortly after the subject's death, deals with all the main points of Constantine's life.³⁴ It is an undeniably respectful work, distinguished by the deployment of a wide range of oral testimonies from a number of people who knew and in many cases worked with Constantine in a variety of contexts. Peter Mason similarly offers a perceptive story, rather more critical than Howat, set out around the principal phases of Constantine's life, very much in the manner of Howat's life history.³⁵ Both take an approach to Constantine that can only be described in the final analysis as complimentary. In this they comply with other accounts that have Constantine as a 'good man'. While such an interpretation is not necessarily invalid, it is not one that should either escape critical scrutiny or prohibit alternatives.

My approach is differentiated from previous writings in various ways. First, it is not biographical in the accepted sense, though in highlighting the life and work of a single individual it inevitably has a biographical turn. Second, what emerges with greater emphasis than that found in previous writings is the historical context that shaped Constantine's thinking and circumscribed his actions. In this respect I take my cue from Marx's dictum about men [sic] making their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.³⁶ Third, I employ a fuller use of primary sources, public and private, to analyse these historical circumstances. The sources, ranging from government papers to private memos and correspondence, have not previously been employed in any depth to explore Constantine's activities. However, in spite of his prominence in many fields, his life is not as well documented as might be supposed. This is seen in the extensive and recently compiled collection of material in the Lord Learie Constantine archive at the National Library of Trinidad and Tobago (NALIS) in Port of Spain. The collection is not yet fully catalogued and digitized, so that working through it can be a somewhat hit and miss procedure. It is rewarding on some aspects of Constantine's activities, disappointingly thin on others.³⁷ Nonetheless, these gaps can to a degree be compensated for by reference to other sources not before consulted on Constantine-related topics. They are to be found in, among others, the papers of the Colonial Office, the Ministry of Labour, the

Race Relations Board, and the BBC. Fourth, I attempt to move away from a congratulatory mode and seek a more critical stance on Constantine; this should not imply an absence of respect for a figure who was clearly admired by many, and deservedly so, but as a wish to bring out failings as well as successes in a career that offered many opportunities for influencing the lives of others.

To set the scene on Constantine, his life might be divided chronologically into three portions. Until his early twenties it was confined largely to Trinidad, where his race and status encouraged aspirations of upward mobility associated with his background as a member of what I call a 'Western educated elite'. They were to motivate him throughout his life. He became a promising cricketer. He earned a living in a variety of clerical jobs, there being only a very limited and poorly remunerated form of professional cricket in the West Indies at that time. However, by making a mark at cricket, particularly during tours of England in 1923 and 1928, it became possible for Constantine to exploit his sporting skills for a very different kind of livelihood. Thus, the second part of his life began in 1929, when he joined Nelson Cricket Club in Lancashire as its professional. He was the first black person to achieve this kind of position.³⁸ He remained in Lancashire as a cricket 'pro' throughout the 1930s, intermittently leaving Nelson to play international cricket in the Caribbean, Australia and India. At this point, though, nothing had been mapped out by way of a career when his playing days came to an end. He had long nourished an ambition to become a lawyer, but possessed no qualifications for it beyond work experience as a clerk in solicitors' offices in Trinidad. Fortuitously, the war provided new opportunities that chimed with his life in cricket. We might say that, for Constantine, the 1939–45 conflict was a 'good war'. The gentlemanly yet combative demeanour he had displayed on the cricket field, allied to the respect he earned as a player, singled him out for the diplomatic tact needed as a welfare officer handling the problems posed in integrating wartime volunteer workers from the West Indies into the British workforce. This pitched him squarely into the problems of race and race relations with which his name was to be associated for the remainder of his life. Up to that point Constantine had operated largely in a regional context: cricket pro in Nelson and wartime civil servant on Merseyside. Early in the war, however, he had begun, in a small way at first, an association with the BBC. It grew over the next decade into a broadcasting presence that gave him a national profile. It culminated eventually in a seat on the Corporation's Board of Governors. He was also briefly Chairman of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) in Britain until its dissolution in 1951, and then between 1956 and 1962 he joined the independence struggle in Trinidad. Here he became Chairman of the People's

National Movement (PNM), was elected a member of the Legislative Council, and served as a minister in Eric Williams's pre-independence administration. Thus from the early 1940s until his death he entered, so to speak, his third age, one of public service on both sides of the Atlantic. In England, this took him into an area of influence and prestige reserved for very few.

Constantine's earliest and strongest impact was felt in sport. As a cricketer he undoubtedly set new standards – pioneering a path that others followed to give Caribbean cricketers greater employment opportunities, and establishing a style of cricket performance that sooner or later others would seek to emulate. The art of fielding, for example, for long an undervalued aspect of cricket, owed a great deal to Constantine's example. He was an all-round cricketer – batsman, bowler and fieldsman – worthy of selection at the highest level for any one of these positions. He was in fact the very prototype of the dynamic player now valued in that most commercial of cricket competitions, the Indian Premier League. But an equally important contribution to the game was felt not so much on the field as beyond the boundary, where he lent his voice to attempts to change the form of play, the social relations and the power structure of cricket. This process assumed many forms over many years. It resulted in the insertion of a new kind of shortened form of play in first-class cricket, a type with which Constantine had originally become familiar as a club professional in the North of England during the 1930s. This in turn introduced a bolder style of attacking cricket that Constantine had always encouraged and which he regarded as having a West Indian provenance. The change wrought in cricket by such innovations was closely related to other developments that carried a more political weight; namely, a challenge to the control of cricket that had been exercised since the nineteenth century by an upper-class elite. The chief wielder of this control was the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC). Its agent on the field of play was the gentleman amateur. By the 1960s the status quo it had long maintained was disintegrating. In its place developed, among other things, an increased status for the place of the professional, something that Constantine had also advocated over many years. For black West Indians, however, more important than either of these was the struggle to end white supremacy in their own cricket structure, symbolized not only by the white gentleman amateur but also by the tradition, itself a product of the racial hierarchy of club cricket in the Caribbean, of a white man captaining what, by the 1940s, was a predominantly black national team. Alongside his friend C. L. R. James, Constantine helped to promote this campaign, which resulted in the appointment of the first black captain of the West Indies in 1960.

Constantine's experiences in sport, all of which had political implications in one form or another, seeped through into the wider world. They shaped the later part of Constantine's life. In contrast with the lives of many black sportsmen in the twentieth century Constantine's post-cricket years were ones of relative prosperity and, perhaps more important, public esteem. Boxing, the sport in which black men most frequently found celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century, provides several examples of financial, social and even mental decline once the sporting life has ended: Joe Louis, the great American heavyweight champion of the 1930s and 1940s, is perhaps the chief example.³⁹ Far less famous, though no less sorrowful, is the footballing case of Leeds United's South African winger Albert Johannson, who lived neglected in poverty after his playing days had ended in the 1960s.⁴⁰ Indeed, few professional sportsmen and women, whether black or white, could have expected to attain the position achieved by Constantine after he had finished playing cricket. Fellow black West Indians Arthur Wint and E. McDonald Bailey enjoyed success in athletics just after the Second World War, though neither had anything like the sustained eminence of Constantine in his life after sport.⁴¹ Constantine himself could scarcely have expected it either. As in all personal success stories he enjoyed an element of good fortune (luck, to put it more bluntly) – unplanned opportunities came his way that he then exploited to his advantage. He worked hard in his various endeavours, and managed his career adroitly, with quiet though persistent help from his wife, Norma. Almost everything flowed from his achievements on the cricket field, from which he created a public persona that exactly suited the aspirations of a man of his race and background in a country – England – still largely unenlightened in matters of race relations.

IV

It is almost half a century since Constantine's death. His name is now less familiar than it once was and there is a sense in which Constantine, once probably the most famous black person in Britain and the Caribbean, has become something of a 'forgotten man'. There are, for example, only scant references to him in the literature on modern race relations and, even more noticeable, little mention of him in the studies of Trinidadian politics that deal with the period when he was a leading figure in the PNM. He is not, though, completely removed from the public gaze. There is an English Heritage blue plaque on a house in Earl's Court, London where the Constantines lived from 1949 until 1954, when they

returned to Trinidad. In Nelson there is now (since 2011) a blue plaque (not endorsed by English Heritage) on his house in Meredith Street where the family lived for almost twenty years. Strangely, it seems to many, there is no statue in Nelson honouring his contribution to the town, where he was a Freeman of the Borough.⁴² There is a Learie Constantine Centre in North London, not far from Dollis Hill tube station, run by the Learie Constantine West Indian Association, providing youth, community, and mental health services. Also in London the National Portrait Gallery has a bronze bust of Constantine, made just before his death, by Karin Jonzen. In Trinidad, the land of his birth, the old Concrete Stand at the Queen's Park Oval in Port of Spain has been renamed after him. The memorial is, however, somewhat overshadowed by newer buildings commemorating other Trinidad cricketers, notably Jeffrey Stollmeyer and Gerry Gomez. Both were white players and, later in life, leading cricket administrators. The main stand at the ground is named after Brian Lara, the country's most recent cricket hero, for whom there is also a statue at the head of Independence Avenue in the centre of Port of Spain. Constantine has no such prominent monument, but there is a sports ground in the suburb of Tunapuna bearing his name.

Do these memorials merely hark back to a previous era, suggesting that Constantine is now a distant memory, a figure with little relevance to the twenty-first century? Many people, even those who remember his name, might be hard pressed to say why his life might still be worth remembering for us today. In one sense this is a way of posing the old question: 'what is the use of history?' And, perhaps, supplementing it with a further, more quarrelsome one: 'must history *always* be shown to have a contemporary relevance?' There is nowadays a strong impulse in both popular and academic writing to answer 'yes' to that second question, and by so doing to provide an answer to the first; that is, 'there is no use in history *unless* it can be shown to have relevance to our lives today.' Were this test to be applied to Constantine (though I am not suggesting that it necessarily should be) two aspects of his life would demand close scrutiny for their twenty-first century relevance: cricket and race. In cricket, a game that has evolved in a variety of forms since Constantine began playing in the 1920s, his ideas about it and his own on-field performances connect readily with the formats in which the game is played today. Race problems are as important today as they were when Constantine first became seriously involved in trying to deal with them in the 1940s. His work in this field illustrates if nothing else the perdurability of racial attitudes and conflict, and provides us with examples of approaches that might, or might not, serve in shaping contemporary solutions to a still important social problem.