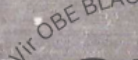


C.L.R. JAMES

Photograph by D. Bailey

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 3, 1862. It is a very long letter, and it contains a great deal of information about the state of the country at that time. It is a very important document, and it is one of the most interesting letters that I have ever read.



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C.L.R. JAMES : A Biographical Introduction

Cyril Lionel Robert James - 'Nello' to his friends - was born on 4 January 1901 in Tunapuna, Trinidad. Author of major historical studies, a remarkable novel, short shorties, a play; early Pan-Africanist and a crusading figure in Black politics on three continents; philosopher, political visionary and innovator in marxist theory and working-class organisation; literary critic and writer on art, sport and society; prolific correspondent, teacher, activist - he has above all been a committed participant in the events of his time. His early years provide some clues about the development of his wide range of interests and involvements, and on a rare occasion when he has given personal details about his family he said of his parents:-

My father was the head of the Teachers' Training School at Tranquillity. He was a great runner of the quarter mile, he was a fine batsman. He taught himself to play music, he used to play the organ in the church. He taught himself shorthand, he used to do special reporting for the newspapers. I am not merely telling you about a remarkable man. What I am saying is, he was born in 1876 and he was doing all these things by the end of the century, and if he had gone to Paris, to London, to New York, anywhere, he would have been able to take his place That is what I want you to know about the West Indians, that is what my father was

My mother was a reader I don't know that if in the years between 1901 and 1910 there was anybody in the Caribbean, and not many people in Britain, in her status and in mine, who read so many books. All sorts of books came into the house. She read perpetually, and as she put the books down I picked them up (From 'The Old World and the New', text of speech delivered 4 January 1971; reprinted in *At the Rendezvous of Victory* pp 203 - 204).

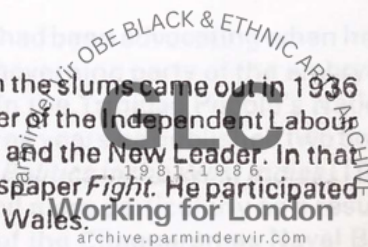
Rooted in this background, C.L.R. James was destined to become one of the most versatile and influential personalities of his generation.

He attended Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain as an exhibition scholar from 1910 - 1918, and in the 1920's taught English and History there himself. During his time he distinguished himself as a club cricketer and an athlete (holding the Trinidad high-jump record at 5 feet 9 inches from 1918 - 1922), and he began writing fiction. His talent for this was recognised as early as 1928, when his 'La Divina Pastora' was reprinted in the USA as one of the year's *Best Short Stories*. With a small group of intellectuals and writers, including Alfred Mendes, Albert Gomes and Ralph de Boissiere, he was closely connected with two magazines which heralded the strong emergence of an indigenous Caribbean literature. *Trinidad*, edited by James and Mendes, appeared twice (Christmas 1929 and Easter 1930), containing in its first issue James's then controversial story 'Triumph' - probably the earliest depiction of Port of Spain 'barrack yard' slum life. *The Beacon*, edited by Gomes, appeared for twenty-eight issues between March 1931 and November 1933, and James's frequent contributions, including short stories and book reviews, were part of the tremendous cultural impact of the magazine hand.

Spring 1932 he came to London, with the encouragement of his friend and one-time cricketing opponent Learie Constantine, whom he was to help write his autobiography, and for a while James lived in Constantine's adopted town of Nelson, Lancashire. He had brought with him the manuscript of his first book, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, which argued the case for independence for the colonies. With Constantine's assistance it was published later that year and bridged in 1933 as the pamphlet *The Case for West-Indian Self Government*.

A cricket report by James in the *Daily Telegraph* brought him to the notice of Neville Cardus, as a result of which James began to write as cricket correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, from 1932 - 36. This, followed by similar employment with the *Glasgow Herald* for the next two years, provided him with a living throughout his first stay in Britain.

In 1936 James returned to Trinidad, in the run-up to the West Indian independence he had meanwhile become active in British politics and society. Until 1936 he was a member of the Independent Labour Party and chairman of its Finchley branch, writing regularly for the ILP papers *Controversy* and the *New Leader*. In that year he left the ILP to help form the Revolutionary Socialist League and was editor of its newspaper *Fight*. He participated in the movement for the unemployed, and made speaking tours in England, Scotland and Wales.



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His enduring concern for Africa was also very evident at this time. Prompted by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, James and a group of others of African descent - including Mrs. Amy Garvey, Jomo Kenyatta and George Padmore, whom he had known since childhood - formed an association in London in 1935 called the International African Friends of Abyssinia. On this issue he wrote many articles for *The Keys*, journal of the League of Coloured Peoples, and for the *New Leader*, agitating among British workers for solidarity actions. In 1937 when Padmore founded the International African Service Bureau, James became editor of its journal, *International African Opinion*. Padmore's close links with Kwame Nkrumah, first president of independent Ghana, grew out of an introduction by James, who wrote to Padmore in 1945 'George, this young man is coming to you do what you can for him because he's determined to throw the European out of Africa'.

James played a part in the growth of the troskyist movement in France, and was one of the British delegates to the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938. With the publication of his extensive history of the Third International, *World Revolution* (1937), *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938), *The Black Jacobins* (1938), his famous study of the first successful New World slave revolt in San Domingo, and his translation from French to Boris Souvarine's *Stalin* (1939), the first major expose of its subject, C.L.R. James firmly established himself as an international historical and political writer. In addition, his ability as a dramatist was well demonstrated in his play *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, performed in 1936 at the Westminster Theatre with Paul Robeson in the lead (and the author himself in the cast).

At the end of 1938 James went to the USA on a lecture tour and remained there for the next fifteen years. In this period his intellectual activity developed in two main directions: First, he pioneered the idea of an autonomous black movement which would be socialist but not subject to control by the leadership of white majority parties and trade unions. The record of his 1938 discussions with Trotsky, in which he laid the basis of this principle, is still one of the fundamental tests establishing a black marxism. James took part in wartime sharecroppers' strikes in the South, and agitated among Blacks to oppose the World War. His other main, and interacting, activity was in the Socialist Workers' Party, where together with Raya Dunayevskaya he led a tendency (the Johnson-Forest tendency) that gradually elaborated an independent marxism, breaking with its troskyist background. It extended to women and youth its idea of the special role of the black movement and later began to criticize the traditional 'domestic centralist' version of the marxist organisation. This rethinking is recorded in various political documents of the tendency and in articles in *The New Internationalist* during the 1940s; it culminates in two full-length works, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (written in 1948) and *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950). During this time James had also helped to initiate the first English translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In 1952, in the heyday of McCarthyism, he was interned on Ellis Island - it was while there that he mostly wrote his brilliant study of the work of Herman Melville, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* - and the following year was expelled from the United States.

Spending the next five years in England, James continued to contribute to the political debate in the US through the pages of the Detroit-based journal *Correspondence*. In 1958 he published *Facing Reality*, which dealt with the Hungarian revolution and the growth of rank-and-file shop stewards-type movements in Europe and North America. At the same time he embarked on a programme of writing in which he was to re-examine the basis of his assumptions about human culture, and it was with this purpose that on his return to Britain began *Beyond a Boundary*, part autobiography and a classic study on the game of cricket.

The struggle for colonial emancipation in which James had continuously been involved was by now showing some results. In the years before the second World War he had been among the very few who not only foresaw but worked for the freedom of Africa, and he maintained and strengthened his links with the Pan-Africanist movement, and with Nkrumah (whom he first met in America in the 1940s) during visits to Ghana. James has frequently written of Nkrumah's significance in the history of Africa and his book *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (written many years before its eventual publication in 1977) chronicles the events that led up to and ensued from the Gold Coast becoming the first African country to win independence in 1957.

In 1958 James returned to Trinidad, in the run-up to the West Indian independence he had been advocating when he left a quarter of a century earlier. He became Secretary of the Federal Labour Party, the governing party of the embryonic West Indies Federation which he supported, and he worked with Dr. Eric Williams in the Trinidad People's National Movement, editing and writing copiously for its newspaper, *The Nation*. In the next three years he published two books, *Modern Politics* (a series of public lectures delivered in Port of Spain in 1960) and *Party Politics in the West Indies* (1961). His partnership with Williams came to an end with the break-up of the Federation, and more particularly as a result of Williams' rejection of a non-aligned position in favour of the USA and its retention of the Chaguaramas Naval Base. *Modern Politics* was banned, and James returned to England in 1962, a few days before the West Indies achieved independence.

He continued to publish from a distance in the Trinidadian press, and returned in 1965 as a cricket correspondent to report the Test series. He was immediately put under house arrest, but his status as one of the founding fathers of West Indian independence ensured an outcry that led to his release. Staying for several months, he founded and edited newspaper, *We the People*, and initiated the formation of the Workers' and Farmers' Party.

From 1966 his residence alternated between England and North America, with occasional visits to the Caribbean lecturing and writing prolifically on the variety of matters which have concerned him throughout his life. He initiated the 6th Pan-African Congress in Dar-es-Salaam in 1964, but because of a decision to exclude certain dissident Caribbean movements he declined to attend himself. He has contributed to a number of journals throughout the world, as well as inspiring various publications and dissertations. During the 1970s he taught and lectured extensively at American universities - at Howard University, as Visiting Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, Illinois, as Professor of Humanities at Federal City College, Washington, Harvard, Yale, Princeton - making important contributions especially to Black Studies. The honorary doctorates he has received include one from the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1971, and one from the University of Kent in 1984.

He now lives in Brixton, and continues to write, with a regular cricket column in *Race Today*. His most recent books have been *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (Allison & Busby, 1984), his third volume of Selected Writings, and *Race Today's* 1984 publication *C.L.R. James's 80th Birthday Lectures*. In 1983 Channel 4 screened a series of talks entitled *The Best of C.L.R. James* - on America, the Caribbean, Cricket and Solidarity in Poland - and he also featured in conversation with E.P. Thompson in a film entitled *Talking History*. Thompson has said of C.L.R.: -

What an extraordinary man he is! It is not a question of whether one agrees with everything he has said or done: but everything has had the mark of originality, of his own flexible, sensitive and deeply cultured intelligence. That intelligence has always been matched by a warm and outgoing personality. He has always conveyed not a rigid doctrine but a delight and curiosity in all the manifestations of life. I'm afraid that American theorists will not understand this, but the clue to everything lies in his proper appreciation of the game of cricket.

Margaret Busby
February 1985