

# C L R James

C L R James died on 31 May, at the age of 88.

Born in Trinidad in 1901, he was an agitator for West Indian and African independence, and an associate of the pioneering West Indian and African nationalists; organiser of black sharecroppers in the racist Deep South of the US; a militant in the US and British Trotskyist movement; a prominent mainstream Trinidadian politician in the late '50s and early '60s; a lone aged prophet for the generation of black militants who became active in the '60s and '70s; and author of many books and articles on a wide range of subjects.

James wrote one very important book, *The Black Jacobins*, about the rising of the blacks of Santo Domingo under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, and at least one very useful book, *World Revolution*, a history of the Communist International to 1936.

James grew up in a world awash with national chauvinism and then with hysterical pseudo-scientific zoological racism, all of it superimposed on the staple centuries-old anti-black racism which had been woven from the slave trade into the fabric of post-Renaissance European and American society.

No wonder James was an outsider. That much came to him with his community, its geography, and the colour of his skin. The rest, a life-long commitment to the struggle of the oppressed, and all he did with voice, pen and organisational work in that cause, he generated in himself.

By the time he died James enjoyed considerable fame. It was commonplace in the last decade and a half to find breathlessly lauding articles about James in the bourgeois press. It was natural and easy enough — especially, perhaps, for journalists with a narrow modern mainstream education and a narrow experience of life — to weave the facts of James's broad life and broader achievements into heroic myth and story.

The classless universality of the world-wide black cause overshadows the 'narrowness' of the revolutionary working-class commitment of James's middle years, and anyway James himself had shed that 'narrowness', though he remained a socialist and called himself a Marxist still.

In exchange for what had James shed that 'narrowness'? He broke with the Trotskyist movement in 1951, when he left the Socialist Workers' Party of the USA. Together with others, he had made many just criticisms of that movement and the direction it had taken.

Post-war Trotskyism was being given shape in its attempt to analyse Stalinism, which was now plainly no longer what it had seemed to Trotsky — a transitory regime, which could not be designated a new exploiting society only because it was transitory, with its dominant bureaucracy a malignant social growth rather than an organically functioning ruling class. James advocated his own 'state capitalist' analysis, and talked of the danger of what he called 'Pabloism' replacing Trotskyism.

The problem was that 'Trotskyism' no longer existed as a ready-made complete doctrine. It had to be recreated and recast. But when James left the Trotskyist movement in 1951, he moved not towards a recreated, recast, renovated Trotskyism, but radically away from Leninism altogether.

He resorted to cloudy and sometimes almost mystical generalities about the spontaneous generation of socialism by way of the everyday activities of the existing labour movement. It was no longer necessary to

build a Leninist party. History had superseded Lenin.

Thus James paralleled the 'orthodox' Trotskyist movement, which responded to defeat by looking to *other* forces, even other classes than the working class, to carry out the 'world revolution'. They too broke with Leninism, though without acknowledging it. Both James and the 'orthodox' Trotskyists said: we are defeated, but nevertheless we are winning. Both moved from a rational conception of a movement to be built which would lead the working class to achieve socialism, to a 'millennarian' concept of Revolution which had no clear notion of ends and means, of the who and what of it.

Today, the reappearance of the Chinese working class shows how monstrous was the acceptance by some would-be Trotskyists of the Chinese Stalinist party as the force to lead the socialist revolution.

The defeats suffered by the British working class show how senseless was the regression of James (and others, among them until 1968 Tony Cliff of the British SWP, though he did not go as far as James) to a belief in the self-sufficiency of working-class spontaneity. For few post-war working classes were more creatively militant and innovative as to means of struggle than the British working class was in the '60s and early '70s. Militancy alone was not enough.

Modern history has not rendered the ideas associated with Lenin and Trotsky out of date; on the contrary, it is one long series of negative vindications of the idea that the working class, even when militant and creative, cannot win unless its vanguard militants have succeeded in building a Marxist cadre organisation within the broad workers' movement.

At least James looked to the workers and oppressed groups. How he went from those ideas to become the secretary of Dr Eric Williams's ruling party in Trinidad is something of a mystery to me. He fell out with Eric Williams and was put under arrest and deported.

James P Cannon, who had persuaded C L R James to go to the United States and help the Trotskyist movement in the vital work of organising black workers there, said of James after his departure from the ranks of the Socialist Workers' Party USA: "*The Johnsonites were personal cultist followers of Johnson as a Messiah... [Johnson] was the name James used inside the SWP. A cult requires unthinking fools for the rank and file. But that is not all. In order for a cult to exist, it is not enough for a leader to have personal followers — every leader has personal influence more or less — but a cult leader has to be a cultist himself*".

These are harsh words, but they are probably fair, and better than the prevalent uncritical sentimentalising of James. James broke with Trotskyism not for something better but to pursue an erratic, meandering course which, taken all in all, was worse than the post-Trotsky Trotskyism he criticised before his departure in 1951. He remained broadly in our camp, but he leaves us little to build on for the future.

The latter-day public cult of James in Britain was a strange thing. Amidst all the lavish journalistic praise, James must sometimes have taken offence, or at least paused to consider if some of it was concerned less with his undeniable status as a very capable human being with important achievements to his credit, than with a cult of him as a token black revolutionary.

Jack Cleary