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C. L. R. James and the Study of Culture.

By Andrew Smith. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. 224. ISBN 9780230220218. £55 (hbk).

The late, great Trinidadian Marxist historian, writer, playwright, novelist and activist C. L. R. James (1901–89) was a creative and original ‘student of culture’ from a very young age, avidly reading English literature, watching cricket matches and displaying a fascination for calypso and carnival while growing up as a member of the black middle class in a British Crown colony. He remained one throughout a long and peripatetic life as a revolutionary, which took him across the Atlantic world, first to Britain, then America, then Africa, and included brief returns to the Caribbean. Author of classic works such as *The Black Jacobins* (1938), a majestic history of the Haitian Revolution, and also *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a semi-autobiographical study of West Indian cricket, James was a towering ‘thought-leader’ of intellectual decolonization as the British Empire underwent its decline and fall and Caribbean culture developed, flowered and took its rightful place in the sun.

As Andrew Smith, a lecturer at the University of Glasgow, reminds us in this accessible and scholarly new study,

James's personal experience of popular culture's political charge in colonial Trinidad, allied to a real mastery of the European high cultural tradition, gave him a breadth and generosity of vision that stands out among twentieth-century intellectuals. Even those who most obviously invite comparison, such as Raymond Williams, are more limited than James in some respects, having less to say about the experiences of colonization and of racism in the shaping of the modern world. (2)

Though James's accomplishments as a cultural critic have been celebrated by scholars before – indeed he received a posthumous ‘canonization’ as a ‘pioneering icon’ of ‘cultural studies’ and ‘postcolonial studies’ – Smith's *C. L. R. James and the Study of Culture* is most welcome as it stands as the first full-length work of analysis of this entire sphere of James's existence. ‘Here the impossible union of spheres of existence is actual’, T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Dry Salvages*, and it is to Smith's credit that he attempts to accomplish such an ‘impossible union’, elegantly weaving James's concern with cultural questions together with his wider concerns with politics, economics and philosophy.

Smith's essential argument, developed and illuminated vividly with examples drawn from an impressive range of writings, was that James's ‘concerted emphasis on understanding the specific, intrinsic qualities of cultural practices’ was ‘highly original’ and a ‘distinctive method’ (2). To demonstrate this, Smith even puts ‘theory into practice’ at one point by undertaking his own detailed distinctly Jamesian analysis of one brilliant stroke by West Indian batsman Brian Lara in 1995 in a Test Match against England. Yet as Smith notes, ‘although James gave due attention to the vagaries of individual artistry – much more attention, indeed, than has been usual amongst Marxist critics – he insists that cultural creation is always a social phenomenon’ (66). Certainly James was a pioneer in the way he ‘did not overlook the degree to which the audiences and crowds of twentieth-century mass culture were capable of refusals and refashionings with regard to the cultural texts of their own times’ (91). Smith also raises the intriguing question of whether James offers us a ‘materialist account of artistic genius’ in his discussion of figures such as the West Indian cricketers George Headley and Gary Sobers (114), concluding that ‘the genius is a figure of human possibility in all of its riot of variety and unpredictability, on which we all have a claim’ (126).

E. P. Thompson once famously suggested that ‘the clue to everything lies in [James's] proper appreciation of cricket’ (27), and those who take a Thompsonian position will

certainly find much here to savour. In particular, Smith develops a thought-provoking and perhaps to some provocative defence of *Beyond a Boundary* in the face of those who have accused it of ‘presenting some unconscious defence of an imperial “games ethic”’ in its analysis of the dramatic spectacle of cricket (28). Yet alongside astute commentary on well-known works as *Beyond a Boundary* and James's explorations in literary criticism with respect to the likes of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Smith's often remarkably original research allows him to introduce more generally overlooked topics. These include James's thoughts on the 1968 Basil D'Oliveira cricket controversy, Clausewitz's *On War*, and the set of short children's stories written by James for his son Nobbie during the 1950s. Other highlights include a lengthy discussion of the famous appeal of William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* for James, and the drawing of some intriguing parallels with his own novel, *Minty Alley*.

Overall, there remains much more to be said about the matter of C. L. R. James and the *Study of Culture* than is discussed in this slim volume. Such an ambitiously titled work could – some would say should – so easily have been a grand, sprawling, multi-volume affair. James's early intellectual influences as a cultural thinker, for example, deserve more attention, and *Beyond a Boundary* reveals quite surprising figures such as Matthew Arnold were at one time critically important. Neil Lazarus is quoted stressing how James was one of the ‘truly decisive’ Marxist cultural theorists of the twentieth century (64), and here it might have been useful to have further explored the extent to which James's thinking was shaped by works such as Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (37). Smith rightly notes James's Marxist stress on understanding the ‘totality’ of society, and his ‘characteristic insistence on thinking about the different parts of social experience (economic, cultural, political, personal and so forth) as wholly interrelated’ (11). One question that then arises is whether James's understanding of American ‘mass culture’ in the middle of the twentieth century was shaped by his belief that a new mode of organizing production – ‘state capitalism’ – was emerging globally. Nonetheless, Smith's work achieves its admirable aim of providing ‘a clear account of James's approach to the various practices and products of human creativity’ (17), and so will doubtless be appreciated by both those new to James and ‘James-scholars’ alike.

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