

**“What would an Athenian have thought of the day’s play?”: C.L.R.
James’s early cricket writings for *The Manchester Guardian***

Christian Høgsbjerg*

University College London Institute of the Americas, UK

*Email: cjhogsbjerg@hotmail.com

In April 1933 the young Trinidadian writer C.L.R. James started work alongside the famous critic Neville Cardus as a cricket correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, writing nearly 140 brief reports for the newspaper over the next three seasons. Cardus’s appointment of a newly-arrived British colonial subject like James to such a prestigious post remains quite remarkable. James’s job meant he travelled widely for the first time across England reporting on county clashes, and he began to develop his distinctive philosophy on the game. This article offers the first critical excavation of James’s cricket writing in these early years and thereby examines the future author of *Beyond a Boundary*’s first engagement with “English cricket” as a popular dimension of imperial metropolitan culture. It argues that James’s political radicalization towards militant anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist activism in Britain during this critical period found expression in his cricket writing.

Keywords: C.L.R. James; *Beyond a Boundary*; Cricket; the Caribbean; Neville Cardus; *The Manchester Guardian*.

In April 1933 the young black Trinidadian writer C.L.R. James started work alongside Neville Cardus as a cricket correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*. According to Paul Buhle (1993), James’s authorized biographer, this made James “the first West Indian, the first man of colour, to serve as cricket reporter for the *Guardian*” (42), and indeed possibly the first black professional sports reporter in British history. In *Beyond a Boundary*, first published in 1963, James recalled how Cardus’s “vivid darting style” ensured that “the *Manchester Guardian* held a unique position in the journalism of cricket” (James [1963] 1969, 123, 179), making the appointment of a newly arrived black colonial subject like James to such a prestigious post even more remarkable. James recalled his time as a cricket reporter during the 1930s as “happy

days” noting that, “if I were writing the usual type of cricket reminiscences I would have plenty to say” (149). For *The Manchester Guardian*, James covered all manner of games, but was mainly tasked with following Lancashire around the country as they did battle over the course of three days against other county sides. James spent ten months from May 1932 to March 1933 staying with the family of the legendary Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine in Nelson. However, his cricket work took him further afield, and in the summer of 1933 he visited cricket grounds in, among other places, Birmingham, Northampton, Harrogate and Scarborough. The opportunity for relentless writing practice allowed James to hone his technique, first developed as a sports reporter in colonial Trinidad. Drawing also on his past experience as a fine cricketer, he recalled that he was soon back in “good form”, explaining: “When I went round English cricket grounds reporting the matches of the Lancashire team [...] these were times when I could sense the course of an over from the way the batsman stood waiting between balls” (44).

This essay will excavate and explore James’s early cricket writing from the seasons 1933, 1934 and 1935, and in the process illuminate the particularities of his “voyage in” from colonial Trinidad to the “mother country” of Britain. This is important as James’s early writing for the *Manchester Guardian* represents the first engagement of the future author of *Beyond a Boundary* – that masterful dissection of “British civilization” through a pioneering cultural history of cricket – with “English cricket” as a popular dimension of imperial metropolitan culture. Moreover, if James tended to be a cricket reporter somewhat in the shadow of Cardus during the “golden age” of *The Manchester Guardian*, his position as a black British colonial subject who was developing into an important anti-colonialist activist and thinker means his writing nonetheless offers us a different and quite unique take on this “imperial game”. James’s work gave him an unparalleled opportunity to cast his gaze over a custom and practice that was not just the game of English-speaking peoples across the British Empire, but arguably the “national game” in the imperial metropolis itself. “It was a great feeling”, he later recalled in an interview with Alex Hamilton in the *Guardian* on June 25, 1980, “to sit beside *The Times* in the Number One seat allowed to the *Manchester Guardian* at Old Trafford”, Lancashire’s home cricket ground.¹

It remains a little puzzling that no-one has previously examined James’s early cricket journalism in *The Manchester Guardian* in a systematic fashion. In 1986, Allison and Busby published *Cricket* (James 1989), a collection of James’s writing on his beloved game edited by Anna Grimshaw. Stefan Collini’s review of *Cricket* in the *Times Literary Supplement* on September 25, 1987 acknowledged that though the author of *Beyond a Boundary* had “certainly

earned his right” to such a volume, the decision to republish some of James’s *Manchester Guardian* pieces did “little justice to the author of that deeply pondered, carefully crafted work”. Collini explained that:

In general, if such ephemera are to bear reprinting so long after the events they describe, the author must either be a distinguished stylist in his own right or else rise to a level of analysis that transcends the local detail. James’s early *Guardian* pieces meet neither of these criteria. Perhaps he consciously disciplined himself to write in a manner he thought appropriate to the stiffer social world of English cricket, perhaps his role as Cardus’s understrapper did not permit much adventurousness, either practically or psychologically. Certainly, some of the writing has a slightly dated, *Boy’s Own* ring to it now: reporting a run-out, for example, he wrote “Leyland could not get back in time and had to go: it was a grave loss to the English eleven”.

This essay will suggest that the dozen selected reports from the *Manchester Guardian* that Collini read do not do full justice to the nearly 140 such reports penned, which were rated highly by contemporaries. Indeed, Fredric Warburg, of radical publishers Secker and Warburg, in his memoir *An Occupation for Gentlemen* recalled James’s “splendid articles on county matches for the *Manchester Guardian*” (1959, 215). More critically, in these reports we can see the embryo of James’s distinctive Marxist philosophy on the game emerging. However, to understand how and why this is the case, it is necessary first to examine how the early 1930s was a transformative period for James politically and intellectually – perhaps even the most transformative period of his whole life.

Cricket literature, crowd psychology and political radicalization

From about the 1880s, as Matthew Engel (1986) notes, “Lancashire cricket began to occupy, if not quite a central position, then at least an honoured corner of the pages of *The [Manchester] Guardian*”, and by the 1920s a great tradition had been established (11). Engel writes:

If there was a golden age as far as the *M.G.* was concerned, it began after the war when a young man who had been serving as a reporter, drama critic and

[C.P.] Scott's personal assistant fell ill with a pulmonary condition and, by way of convalescence, went at the news editor's suggestion for a few days in the sun at Old Trafford. And Neville Cardus, "Cricketer" as he was bylined after 1920, began to give the discerning readers of Manchester the best and most enjoyable cricket reports the world has ever seen. [...] The "Cricketer" era exactly spanned the inter-war period; in 1940, feeling redundant in Manchester shorn by war of both good cricket and good concerts, Cardus sailed to Australia and did a stint as music critic of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He wrote about cricket on and off for *The Guardian* until his death in 1975, aged eighty-five. (13)

Cardus was a foundational figure in modern cricket literature, with the stress on *literature*, and as Ramachandra Guha (2006) has suggested, "in his writing, the portrayal of character and the evocation of context take precedence over the analysis of technique" (xiii-xiv; see also Bateman 2009). James's own literary approach was close to that of Cardus. James had grown up on the Victorian tradition of cricket literature epitomized by Ranjitsinhji's *The Jubilee Book of Cricket* (1897), and as the author of short stories and a novel, *Minty Alley* (which would be published in 1936), James had come to England ostensibly to try and make a living as a novelist – something impossible in colonial Trinidad. James had met Cardus and been appointed to *The Manchester Guardian* while staying in Nelson with the family of his compatriot, Learie Constantine. On August 27, 1932, James went to watch Nelson cricket club playing away to local side Rawtenstall, whose team included the legendary veteran bowler Sydney Barnes. Barnes, aged 59, was playing his last match and James writes: "I was profoundly impressed by him, both as a cricketer and as a man. Coming home that evening the old journalistic spirit stirred in me" ([1963] 1969, 123). Paying homage to "the greatest of all bowlers", James wrote a report on Barnes's last match and showed it to Constantine, who suggested James send it to Cardus to see if any local papers might be interested. Cardus published the article in *The Manchester Guardian* itself on September 1, 1932 and called James in to see him. As Stuart Hall (1992) explains, Cardus discovered James "had a phenomenal memory and knew the scores every touring team had made since about 1901" (6), and made him an offer he could not refuse – to help cover next year's cricket season.

James continued with his other literary projects while working for *The Manchester Guardian*. In 1932 he had begun writing a play about the heroic leader of the Haitian Revolution, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*

which he would finish in 1934, and then revise again for its first production in 1936, in London with Paul Robeson in the title role. In this period, he continued to write and publish very short stories for the *Port of Spain Gazette* and he even published one story based on a recent visit to Ireland – “Irish Farmer” – in *The Manchester Guardian* on November 20, 1934. One of James’s reports from Weston-super-Mare in *The Manchester Guardian* on August 8, 1935 noted that “if your ordinary county cricketer were a novelist, today’s play between Somerset and Lancashire here would be described as typical of him in his prime; the bowling was steady, the batting sedately good and on a true wicket always above the bowling”. At other times, James would consciously reveal his knowledge of literature, noting in *The Manchester Guardian* on 9 July 1934 “more and more the old late cut is coming into fashion again; so once upon a time all the young men were for Racine, and then forgot him, and then took him up again”.

Cricket, unlike a multitude of other sports, has had, as Andrew Smith (2006) notes, “a certain superficial ‘literary’ association ever since it was wrenched from its Georgian and pre-Georgian origins and reconstituted as part of a distinctly bourgeois project of self-definition and pedagogical reproduction in the British public schools” (49). As a life-long avid reader of English “cricket literature” – which manifested itself in the Victorian period in a wide variety of forms from Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days* and the novels of Charles Dickens through to Prince Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji’s *Jubilee Book of Cricket* – and a product of an education modelled on the British public school system having been a scholarship boy at Queen’s Royal College (QRC) in Port of Spain, it is perhaps not surprising that James developed the tradition represented by Cardus in seeing cricket as an art form comparable to drama or opera, and by utilizing his literary knowledge in his reports. James, for example, regularly made reference in his *Manchester Guardian* reports to lines from Shakespeare. For example, on August 30, 1933 he quoted from *Coriolanus* to praise a Lancashire player: “Hopwood could almost say ‘Alone I did it.’” Writing of Worcestershire on June 11, 1934, James offered a neat Shakespearian analogy: “Hamlet without the Prince would not be as bad as Othello lacking not only the Moor of Venice but Iago, his officer. Worcestershire without the Nawab of Pataudi and Walters, his captain, are more sadly bereft than Gloucestershire without Hammond”. On August 20, 1934, James quoted from *The Merchant of Venice* – “since naught so stockfish, hard, and full of rage, But music for the time doth change his nature” – after noting that “as soon as the band began to play, Watson cut for three – the first real stroke of his innings”. A few days later, on August 24, 1934, James reached for *As You Like It* to describe how “the experts argued intensively with ‘wise saws and modern instances’ as to

whether Parks was stumped or run out”. And on July 17, 1935, James cited one of Shakespeare’s Sonnets (97) to point out “a skeleton without backbone – that is the Lancashire batting without Ernest Tyldesley. How like a winter hath his absence been”.

Other literary references abound in James’s *Manchester Guardian* match reports. On August 24, 1934, he draws on John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “To make Adam and Eve laugh, the elephant ‘wreathed his lithe proboscis,’ the most that Milton could bring himself to say. The Sussex crowd, more easily amused, laughed uproariously at Tate’s elephantine gambollings”. There were biblical references too, with James noting how “the trumpets blew and the walls of Jericho fell” in a report on one match on August 23, 1934. A year later, on July 27, 1935, James wrote how “the twin names of Oldfield and Washbrook will achieve fame in Lancashire such as that of David and Jonathan in Israel”. On August 23, 1935, James quoted from *Patient Grissell* by the poet Thomas Dekker with “honest labour bears a lovely face”. Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* featured on August 30, 1933: “Berry turned and had a look at Duckworth, in fact ‘cast one longing, lingering look behind’”. Testifying to not only his wide reading but also his classical public-school education at QRC, James also drew upon texts such as Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), noting on June 8, 1934 “when Gloucestershire went in even the ranks of Tuscany were wishing that the dashing Barnett would get some runs”. Virgil’s *Aeneid* was cited on June 9, 1934 (“*facilis descensus averni*”, the descent to hell”). A line from J.A. Froude’s *History of England* was employed on June 14, 1934, when James wrote of the admirable batting partnership between Mead and Lowndes: “Mead was as sound and solid as the heavy roller, and Lowndes seems to have strayed into the cricket of 1934 like an echo from a vanished world”. As well as Froude, James brought in another unexpected Victorian figure, when he noted on June 22, 1934 that the Hampshire batsman Neil McCorkell “is playing a real Samuel Smiles innings, building up his fortune by sobriety and unremitting attention to business”.

Clearly, it is a novelist’s eye for characters that defines James’s early writing. His admiration for the Lancashire wicketkeeper George Duckworth comes through strongly, particularly what he called on August 24, 1933 (perhaps slightly tongue in cheek, given Duckworth’s generally low batting averages) his “excellent and characteristically fearless” batting. As James noted on July 19, 1934, Duckworth “stood out among his fellow-members in the capacity to rise to the occasion and the will to win”. On June 25, 1934, for example, after watching Kent play Lancashire at Old Trafford, James described how it “all seemed over – or nearly”:

Nearly, for Duckworth was still to come. Duckworth walked from the pavilion, gait more decided, shoulders squarer than usual. Duckworth bears his character in every inch of his person and registers changes of mood like a barometer. This obviously was a Duckworth militant. Lewis had just got two men out. Duckworth lifted his first ball over mid-on for three. Then followed a succession of vigorous strokes, many of them beautifully executed and placed, all springing from an indomitable will to score.

The courage displayed by George Duckworth when up against the odds perhaps helps explain why James would in later life once remark to the artist Julian Harber that “besides revolutionaries, there are two other lots of people I admire – artists and wicket-keepers” (Høgsbjerg 2014, 13).

Another likely legacy of his classical education at QRC that comes through in James’s cricket writing is his Hellenism and admiration for Ancient Greece. For example, there are references on May 29, 1935 to Euclid, and on July 12, 1935 to “Herculean labour” and Castor and Pollux, the twin stars of Greek and Roman mythology. James portrayed the Essex bowler Ken Farnes on August 24, 1933 as “like Achilles in battle”. On August 20, 1934, James described how he found himself on a hot day sat watching Lancashire play Kent down at Dover, amid “the sun and gaiety, the tents, summer dresses and music of the Dover festival [...] what a wonderful day and setting for cricket it was!” While the match itself was sadly “limpid”, James took the opportunity to philosophize.

The ancient Athenians had terraced seats in the open air, and if they looked on at Aeschylus and Sophocles, they had their Olympic Games too. What would an Athenian have thought of the day’s play? Probably that the white-flannelled actors moving so sedately from place to place were performing the funeral rites over the corpse of a hero buried between the wickets. Watson and Iddon, from their garb and movements, he would have supposed to be the priests waving the sacrificial wands with solemn dignity.

This remarkable passage speculating about what the ancient Athenians would have made of cricket would be strongly echoed in *Beyond a Boundary*, written a quarter of a century later, testifying to how arguments first advanced in this period by James formed the bedrock of his developing and distinctive philosophy of the game (see James [1963] 1969, 156).

Players moving “sedately” and batsmen batting with “solemn dignity” did not however make for a dramatic spectacle. As James had noted a couple of months earlier, on June 16, 1934, “no conditions of wicket or virulence of spin can prevent fine cricket once the batsman will remember that the bat is an offensive weapon”. But even if one is watching a great batsman, like Don Bradman, demolishing all who stand in his way, the game can still sometimes feel flat, as James noted in his reports on September 10-11, 1934 when the Australians played H.D.G. Leveson-Gower’s XI at Scarborough:

After the first excitement, this sort of thing becomes slightly monotonous. A bowler bowls, Bradman makes a stroke, not a single fieldsmen moves, and the ball is returned from the boundary. The essence of any game is conflict, and there was no conflict here; the superiority on one side was too overwhelming [... the match] threatened to degenerate into boredom, if not misery.

If he had not yet explicitly arrived at the position that cricket was a performative art form like drama, James, the playwright, [nonetheless brought in allusions from the world of theatre](#)~~thought~~. Indeed, on July 24, 1933 he praised in terms deriving from the theatre the “gorgeous cricket” of Surrey batsman Stan Squires as he ultimately made a splendid 236 runs against Lancashire: “Squires gave a good curtain to Act I. off the last ball. A lovely extra cover drive gave Squires his fifty”.

For James the audience had their part to play too, and he tended to be sympathetic to their interventions in proceedings. On July 18, 1934, James wrote in *The Manchester Guardian* of “the cricket anchorite’s true home, the wilderness of the boundary”. The term “anchorite” comes from Ancient Greece, referring to “one who has retreated from the world”. Critically, however, James was a rather atypical “anchorite”, for he saw not “wilderness” but life in the crowds beyond the boundary and brought them into his reports whenever appropriate. Such a position no doubt had its origins in watching matches in colonial Trinidad which could often take on great symbolic and political significance given that – as James analyzed in detail in *Beyond a Boundary* – teams were organized along hierarchical lines of race and class. Yet such an interest in the actions of the great mass of people could also have only been deepened with James’s turn to revolutionary socialism amidst the Great Depression of this period. As Smith has suggested, what came to distinguish James when it came to understanding cricket was “the fact that he understands it to be serious and significant *because of*, and not despite, its status as a popular activity” (2006, 49).

In his report of “Warwickshire’s stolid batting” against Lancashire at Old Trafford, James took note of the actions of the crowd, writing on June 26, 1933 that “a body of sailors gave an appearance of population to one stand; they seemed to have come for a day out, and were willing to contribute their share to the day’s gaiety”:

A leg-glance by Kilner off Booth they applauded vigorously; another, ten minutes later, not quite so vigorously. Soon their enthusiasm had died a natural death, from the best of all causes, lack of fuel. [...] a stroke came periodically, but the sailors began to grow restive. Kilner took his own score over 50 and his own side’s over 100 by means of two fine fours which drew nautical approval. The game slumped again, the crowd began to give advice.

While other more elitist contemporary commentators would scarcely think of passing comment on the behaviour of crowds, on July 18, 1935, James again found time to explain the psychology of the spectators:

The crowd is concerned about the recurrent breakdown in the Lancashire batting, but on this lovely afternoon it wanted some enjoyment. It told the batsmen in the words of the immortal verses that it wanted to be happy, but could not be happy unless they were happy too. What it actually did was to barrack. But, as the lawyers say, the principle was the same.

This is not to say that James lacked respect for the boundary line between the players and spectators itself. On August 17, 1934, he reported how he had found himself watching Lancashire take on Essex at Southend, where “unfortunately a part of the crowd behaved in a somewhat unseemly manner during the intervals”:

Numerous small boys came on to the ground and began little games of their own; no policemen interfered. Far from the officials ordering them off, some of these watched games going on at the very gate of the secretary’s office and did not protest. It is very true that these little boys did no harm and when the bell rang disappeared leaving no litter, but such goings-on are today unheard of. They certainly would not be allowed at Manchester, and it is to be hoped that the M.C.C. will be asked to legislate on the matter at once.

A few days later, however, it seems James reconsidered his (surprisingly somewhat conservative) position about calling for intervention from the officials, the state and the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), when Lancashire paid a visit to Kent. On August 21, 1934 James commented on how “the game of cricket flourishes in Kent”:

Here again, as in Southend, the little boys were playing all over the field during the interval, and the Kent team were in their places and Hopwood was taking guard while the field was still dotted with people going back to their places. Does this light-hearted attitude make for a lower standard of cricket? Kent can point to Woolley, Freeman, Ames, Chapman, Valentine, Levett, Marriott. How many counties today can show such a list?

This slight change in position may have had something to do with James’s politics, for by August 1934, amidst the Great Depression and rise of fascism across Europe, James had become a revolutionary Marxist and activist in the tiny Trotskyist movement in Britain. Indeed, a few years after he left the *Manchester Guardian* he would still be mocked by one political opponent as the “*Manchester Guardian* Trotskyist” (Bornstein and Richardson 1986, 216). In the summer of 1933, James was hard at work politically educating himself in the Marxist classics. While trying to measure James’s political radicalization through his writings on cricket at the time would be problematic, to say the least, there does seem to be some evidence pointing to his deepening engagement with politics. Covering an early match the touring West Indies team played against Northamptonshire, James on May 9, 1933 used terminology from political economy when noting that at least one West Indies slip had a distinctly *laissez-faire* approach to fielding. “[E.L.G.] Hoad, at first slip, is a Free-trader, and for the second time in the match he clashed with the protectionist views of Barrow, the wicket-keeper; not only did the catch go untaken but byes resulted”. On August 14, 1933, while reporting Lancashire play Hampshire at Old Trafford, James even attempted to apply a class analysis (of sorts) to some of the Hampshire players.

Boyes, long, slim, and graceful, fielded at short leg with aristocratic boldness and easy skill. Captain Philip Mead had little to do, but it was pleasant to watch his good-humoured proletarian amble from slip at one end to slip at the other. Kennedy supplied the solid, bourgeois virtues of length, flight and spin

[...] he remained a dangerous bowler, never degenerating into negative theories.

By now, James himself was certainly rethinking his own “solid, bourgeois virtues” inculcated from his time at QRC and was in the process of “degenerating” nicely into Marxism, a “negative theory”, albeit at the pace of a “good-humoured proletarian amble”.

James’s Marxism, with respect to his writings in the *Manchester Guardian* in this period, indeed remains allusive, but references to wider world politics and the threat posed by imperialist and fascist militarism crop up regularly, revealing something of his deepening political radicalization. On September 11, 1933, covering the last game the West Indies played against Leveson Gower’s XI at the Scarborough festival, James noticed that the West Indian bowler Oscar Da Costa and the batsman R.E.S. Wyatt “seemed to have come nicely to terms on a pact of mutual non-aggression”. On June 7, 1934, James described how the Lancashire batsman Ernest Tyldesley “went like a storm-trooper towards the double century” while playing against Gloucestershire in Bristol. In the next week, on June 11, 1934, James portrayed another Lancashire batsman Frank Watson as taking a diametrically opposed Fabian socialist approach, with “a competent piece of batting” that meant, “with a little luck, the inevitability of gradualness produces a century”. James’s burgeoning interest in revolutionary history also comes through at various points in his cricket reports. On August 25, 1933, James brought up the English Civil War, noting that “Essex are a gallant side, led by a gallant captain. In Elizabeth’s time they would have followed the Earl; in the Civil War they would have ridden with Rupert”. On May 16, 1934, and while depicting Lancashire’s batsmen in form against Leicestershire, James evoked the French revolutionary armies under Napoleon, claiming that, “with three hundred up Eckersley called on Booth as Napoleon used to call upon the cavalry to break a weakening enemy”. A couple of months later, on July 13, 1934, James stuck with another analogy from the French Revolution: “Hopwood had got three wickets, upon which Martin and Bull had set their backs to the wall and with the courage of desperation, like Louis’s Swiss Guard at the Tuilleries or the Old Contemptibles at Mons, or some such heroic persons, had played out time”. James’s depth and breadth in terms of reference across literature and history – and not least revolutionary history – here surely suggest that it would not have taken long for James to emerge from the shadows of Cardus as a distinctive voice in English cricket journalism.

The 1933 West Indies Cricket Tour: “Bodyline” in Babylon

One of the most controversial and infamous issues to arise from the very start of James’s employment as a cricket journalist for *The Manchester Guardian* was that of “bodyline”, following the English defeat of the Australians during the Test series of 1932-33 using these tactics. In 1933, the West Indies began their tour of England, and in the run up to the First Test, when the West Indies played Northamptonshire, the storm cloud of controversy surrounding “bodyline” was still blowing around fiercely. James noted on May 9, 1933 that the Northamptonshire player V.W.C. Jupp “as usual, exploited ‘bodyline’ attacks, but seduction rather than intimidation is the aim of his slow, round-the-wicket off breaks”. Many English commentators, however, fell into hypocritical hysteria about how dangerous the West Indian fast bowlers Learie Constantine and E. “Manny” Martindale might be on a fast pitch. James was quick to defend his compatriots, explaining that what they bowled “was not body-line because there was only one man forward short leg on the on side,” and thus not intimidating. However, as James wrote in the *Port of Spain Gazette* on June 15, 1933, he feared that West Indies cricket officialdom might change their bowling line out of deference:

Whether [Jack] Grant [the West Indies captain] will allow himself to be frightened by these English critics is an important question. If he breaks the morale of his fast bowlers by expressing doubts as to whether the tactics of Constantine and Martindale are fair, the West Indies should flay him alive. The English had no mercy on the Australians. Now that the tour is over and the Ashes won, nearly every English writer and cricketer with the most bare-faced effrontery condemns body-line bowling, but when the Australians protested they shrieked to high heaven that there was nothing in it and the Australians were merely squealing. This is our chance and if weakness and a lack of sense of realism in the high command makes us lose it, then our blood be upon our own head.

James’s concerns that the “high command” may let the side down went to the heart of the problem, which as Hilary McD. Beckles (1995) explains, was that it was “the ideological position of white cricketers and administrators that contest with England was essentially a non-political event in which ‘cousins’ exchanged mutual admiration” (152). In 1923, for example, H.B.G. Austin, the white captain of the West Indies side touring Britain, said that he hoped his

team “were worthy to belong to the Mother Country”, declaring there was “no more patriotic part of the Empire than the British West Indies, and [...] they demanded to be left with the Flag under which they bred” (quoted in Williams 2001, 50). A decade on little had changed. The 1933 team contained any number of black players who could have captained the side, including Constantine himself, Martindale, Ben Sealey and George Headley, but it was instead captained by G.C. “Jack” Grant, a Cambridge Blue and member of the Trinidadian white colonial elite who had captained the side in Australia. Beckles notes that Grant “supported the view that England was the motherland that deserved loyalty and respect from all its colonies in all areas of life”, a view many black players in the side did not share, and “this divided and weakened West Indies cricket. The division was political, and had to be removed by political means” (1995, 152).

Writing about the West Indies on the eve of their First Test against England in the *Manchester Guardian* on June 24, 1933, James described himself as “a West Indian who has watched his own team carefully, frankly wishes it to win, and yet has little faith in and no respect for the policy of creating a victorious moral by writing up his own side and writing down the other”. James saw that the absence of Constantine would be a notable blow to the West Indies team given his “wide experience” and “dynamic, exuberant, and prodigious personality”, and because he was “in splendid batting form and [...] in his prime”. However, the 1933 Test Series allowed James to study up close “the other West Indian master of the period”, the naturally outstanding young 22 year-old Jamaican batsman George Headley, whom James hailed in *The Manchester Guardian* on April 17, 1933 as “one of the greatest of living batsmen”, a “master of on-side play” who “loves to jump in to drive”. For James, “Bradman was the only Australian better than he in 1930-1. [...] In England Duleepsinhji and the occasional Hammond are his only equals in stroke-making, Sutcliffe in solidity of defence”. James had already seen Headley in action back in 1930, and as he recalled in *Beyond a Boundary* he “watched the West Indies in the nets at Lord’s in 1933 before the tour began. George never to my knowledge practiced seriously. He fooled around playing the ball here and there. It was his first visit to England, but he was as sure of himself as if he were in Jamaica” (James [1963] 1969, 145-146). Though James would not at this stage develop any kind of explicit theorization relating to a distinctive West Indian “style”, or a sophisticated analysis of how a particular stroke by a master batsman can be revealing of deeper themes about the bodily labour of the player and a particular historical moment or wider political movement, he nonetheless drew attention to the aesthetics of Headley’s performances. As he informed *Manchester Guardian* readers on April 18, 1933, Headley was “as great a master of style as he

is of runs. [...] at the wicket no one can miss his mastery. He is of that type which uses a bat as if it is an extension of the arm. Ease, poise, balance, he has them all”.

However, while James doubtless regularly met with the West Indies team socially, he did not get to cover the full tour itself; that task fell to the more senior figure of Cardus, and so most of James’s reporting for *The Manchester Guardian* instead involved covering Lancashire. Initially, James seems to have been philosophical about this and reporting on Lancashire at Warwickshire at Edgbaston on May 22, 1933 he noted: “what a different atmosphere from Test cricket play and aftermath is this of a county ground, with the match pursuing its somnolent course where newspapers cease from troubling and the cricketer is at rest”. But one gets the sense that quite soon James would have rather been following the first Test between England and the West Indies at Lords rather than a game in Manchester, watching what he called on June 26, 1933 “dull cricket” and “Warwickshire’s stolid batting” at Old Trafford. James did have the chance to catch the West Indies play Yorkshire at Harrogate as he reported on July 7, 1933, and a duel “that bordered on the heroic” took place between the great Yorkshire bowler Hedley Verity and George Headley.

England had won the first Test against the West Indies by an innings and 27 runs, and the second Test began at Old Trafford on July 22, 1933 with James once again forced to miss out, having to cover Lancashire down at the Oval instead. The West Indies batted first, making 375 all out, thanks to a spectacular 169 from Headley. Now as England came out to bat, Grant, the West Indies captain, ordered Martindale and Constantine to try bodyline. Whilst the Old Trafford pitch was not as suited to bodyline as the hard Australian wickets, facing such tactics for the first time, England suffered at first, falling to 134 for 4. However, an inspired 127 from Jardine, his greatest innings and only Test century, rallied England to a total of 374. In the second West Indian innings, Clark bowled bodyline back at the West Indians, and though the match ended in a draw it had been the highest-profile game in which bodyline was bowled in England. In mid-August, England took their revenge in the third and final Test at the Oval, winning by an innings and 17 runs, and thereby taking the series by 2-0. James once again was elsewhere, watching Lancashire play Hampshire. Later, in *Beyond a Boundary*, he remembered how “the body-line upheaval shocked everyone and made the cricket world pull itself up and tread carefully. [...] Jardine soon went, never to return” (James [1963] 1969, 187, 189). Reviewing the West Indies tour on September 22, 1933 in *The Manchester Guardian*, James noted that overall the team had not been “impressive”, though Headley “has been the finest batsman in England this season and one of the greatest players that has ever visited this country”.

In a chapter of *Beyond a Boundary* entitled “Decline of the West”, James would famously analyze bodyline, insisting that it “was not an accident, it was not a temporary aberration”.

It was the violence and ferocity of our age expressing itself in cricket. The time was the early thirties, the period in which the contemporary rejection of tradition, the contemporary disregard of means, the contemporary callousness, were taking shape. The totalitarian dictators cultivated brutality of set purpose [...]. It began in World War I. Exhaustion and a fictitious prosperity in the late twenties delayed its maturity. It came into its own in 1929. Cricket could no more resist than the other organisations and values of the nineteenth century were able to resist. That big cricket survived the initial shock at all is a testimony to its inherent decency and the deep roots it had sunk. ([1963] 1969, 186)

In his cricket writing at the time, James would allude to “the totalitarian dictators” who “cultivated brutality of set purpose”, such as Mussolini, the dictator of fascist Italy who in 1935 prepared for war on the people of Ethiopia. As James noted on May 27, 1935, “the wicket prepared for the match was in places as void of grass as the shining pate of a European statesman filling the day’s news”. On June 24, 1935, while covering Lancashire playing Essex in Chelmsford, James was already making comparisons with international peace conferences organized by the League of Nations. “Nichol’s second ball flew over the batsman’s head straight into the wicket-keeper’s hands. It was as if a delegate to a peace conference had drawn a pistol and fired it over the head of a colleague”. Meanwhile, the Lancashire batsman Frank Watson displayed “vast reserves of stoicism. Had he been a politician he could have made a great speech, showing how while he had been in office his unilateral and apparently selfish policy had contributed powerfully to Lancashire’s collective security”.

James positioned himself in opposition to the contemporary “violence and ferocity of the world”. On Monday July 29, 1935, readers of *The Manchester Guardian* would have read James describe an incident that took place during the match between Hampshire and Lancashire at Southampton, played on the Saturday. “The dullness of the innings was enlivened by music from a loudspeaker, a brass band, singing, and periodical discharges from a gun, with all of which [...] the local Conservative party made demonstration in the stadium next door”. While “it sounded far more exciting than the cricket [...] the gunfire next door continued with

Commented [AV1]: How while he?

no regard for the batsman's concentration", nearly leading one Lancashire batsman, Eddie Paynter, to be dismissed by a "political diversion". "Cricket", James noted wryly, "should be kept well away from politics". This was notably ironic, given James was more than a mere cricket correspondent by this time. He had taken a "political diversion" of his own that had seen him emerge as a leading black public intellectual in the Trotskyist and Pan-Africanist movements, and chair of the recently formed International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) which aimed to rally solidarity with the people of Ethiopia in the face of Mussolini's war plans. A mere ten pages later readers of that Monday's *Manchester Guardian* could have read a report of a meeting of the IAFA the previous evening, where their beloved cricket reporter "gave a lucid history of the European treaties with Abyssinia" and declared that "Abyssinia is a symbol of all that Africa was and may be again, and we look on it with a jealous pride".

Conclusion: The "inherent decency" of cricket

Overall, James clearly found the experience of working for *The Manchester Guardian* following Lancashire – a generally successful side in this period – an enjoyable one. His reports are often humorous, engaging in various forms of word play, as on July 24, 1933:

After Fender came Fishlock, a left-hander, and the leg-breaking Parkinson was immediately taken off so that Booth with his inswingers might try to catch the edge of Fishlock's bat. But Fishlock would not nibble, and with the patience of an angler batted over half an hour for some three runs.

And aside from the evidence of James's growing political radicalization finding explicit reflection in his cricket journalism, what perhaps remains remarkable from a survey of these articles is James's developing philosophical concern with the interplay between both cricketing play and aesthetics, and the interaction of the individual with the crowd. Of course, James in this period was only just becoming a Marxist, and the evidence of his Marxism in the *Manchester Guardian* reports is chiefly allusive. James could not yet have been claimed as a figure to be placed alongside Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács or Leon Trotsky as an outstanding cultural theorist of the classical Marxist tradition. However, during the 1930s the embryo of James's emerging distinctive understanding of a Marxist aesthetics of cricket might nonetheless still be detected. On 16 July 16, 1934, James described in *The Manchester*

Guardian how he had found himself watching “excellent cricket before a fine Sheffield crowd” being played by Australia in a match against Yorkshire:

If the actor is the initial determinant and main contributor, the audience is no mere passive accessory to the play. The Sheffield crowd played a great game all through the day [...]. When Grimmett delivered his subtlest balls one could hear the ripple throughout the ground as each man, a connoisseur, turned to tell his neighbour. They laughed uproariously at the way Grimmett tied up Smailes, and guffawed when Smailes solved it by hitting Grimmett to the boundary. [...] Bradman, on the boundary line, was at his most genial, and seemed to take a special pride in showing the crowd the heights of virtuosity which can be reached in returning a ball. “Put Bradman on,” shouted one man overflowing with good nature and admiration.

When Bradman finally came on, to devastate the Yorkshire bowling the next day, the crowd magnanimously showed their appreciation for the great batsman’s masterful display. As James commented on July 17, 1934:

Bradman began to find himself. Back strokes flowed to the boundary; a man was moved from slip; he cut the next ball past the space. As sometimes in a symphonic movement group after group of instruments enters, so came new stroke after new stroke, until at 50 in seventy minutes the whole orchestra was on. [...] Leyland, the heaviest sufferer, bowled him in the end. As he went in the Sheffield crowd rose at him; few, if any, had ever seen an innings like this, and, apart from the runs, it is an innings charged with significance.

James comparison of Bradman’s batting to a symphonic movement ~~in an orchestra~~ was characteristic of his writing. Standing as he did within the tradition of cricket literature represented by Cardus, however, as Smith says,

Commented [IS2]: omit?

James’s willingness to treat cricket with the kind of interpretative parameters usually reserved for ‘higher’ forms of culture, i.e., for practices whose intellectual status is precisely opposed to such ‘bodily’ pursuits as sports, would have been no great surprise to his readers. (2006, 49)

Yet James's Marxism meant that critically we findsee in these passages a key reason why James was always optimistic about cricket's "inherent decency" in the face of totalitarianism and imperialist war – because he saw the audience, the spectators of the matches, not as passive objective onlookers but as civilizing subjects in their own right. As Smith rightly observes, albeit in a different context, in James's descriptions of the spontaneous generosity of the crowd towards an outstanding opposing player, such as the Sheffield crowd rising to salute Bradman, we see "a glimpse of the universal" (64).

Commented [AV3]: We find?

Notes on contributor

Christian Høgsbjerg is a Teaching Fellow in Caribbean History at University College London Institute of the Americas. He is the author of *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (2014) and *Chris Braithwaite: Mariner, Renegade and Castaway* (2014), the editor of C.L.R. James's 1934 play about the heroic leader of the Haitian Revolution, *Toussaint Louverture* (2013) and the co-editor of *Celebrating C.L.R. James in Hackney, London* (2015).

References

- Bateman, Anthony. 2009. "'From Far it Look like Politics': C.L.R. James and the Canon of English Cricket Literature." *Sport in Society* 12 (4-5): 497-508.
- Beckles, Hilary McD. 1995. "The Political Ideology of West Indies Cricket Culture." In *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*, edited by Hilary McD. Beckles and Brian Stoddart, 148-161. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bornstein, Sam, and Al Richardson. 1986. *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-1938*. London: Socialist Platform.
- Buhle, Paul. 1993. *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*. London: Verso.
- Engel, Matthew, ed. 1986. *The Guardian Book of Cricket; An Anthology of the Best from a Hundred Years of Cricket Reporting*. London: Pavilion.
- Guha, Ramachandra, ed. 2006. *The Picador Book of Cricket*. London: Picador.
- Hall, Stuart. 1992. "C.L.R. James: A Portrait." In *C.L.R. James's Caribbean*, edited by Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, 3-16. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Høgsbjerg, Christian. 2014. *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- James, C.L.R. [1963] 1969. *Beyond a Boundary*. London: Hutchinson.
- James, C.L.R. 1989. *Cricket*. Edited by Anna Grimshaw. London: Allison & Busby.

Smith, Andrew. 2006. "'A Conception of the Beautiful': C.L.R. James' *Glasgow Herald* Cricket Articles, 1937-1938." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 23 (1): 46-66.

Warburg, Fredric. 1959. *An Occupation for Gentlemen*. London: Secker & Warburg.

Williams, Jack. 2001. *Cricket and Race*. Oxford: Berg.

Note

¹ All the newspaper articles by James used here have been given in-text dates for clarity and they have been accessed via 'Proquest Historical Newspapers: *The Guardian* and *The Observer*'.