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iec.ics@upr.edu

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Sutton, Paul

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## ON ERIC WILLIAMS: AN ASSESSMENT OF SELWYN RYAN'S BIOGRAPHY\*

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Paul Sutton<sup>1</sup>

Selwyn Ryan. 2009. *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man*.  
Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press. pp. x, 1-842.  
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Dr. Eric Williams was Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago for 25 years from 1956 until his death in 1981, during which time he took Trinidad and Tobago to independence in 1962 and set the basic parameters for the economic, social and political development of the country which are still in place today. Prior to this Dr. Williams was an international civil servant employed in the Caribbean Commission and prior to that a distinguished scholar at Oxford University and then academic at Howard University. In his various capacities he published and lectured extensively leaving behind him eight books, numerous articles and lectures and many more speeches.<sup>2</sup> It is a record unmatched anywhere else in the Commonwealth Caribbean and it has created a substantial scholarship in recent years seeking to understand, and in some cases dissect, Eric Williams as an academic, a politician and as a person.

The latest to appear, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man*, by Dr. Selwyn Ryan, Professor Emeritus at the University of the West Indies, is by far the largest and the most comprehensive. It is a new book but also contains former work which has been edited, revised, rewritten, updated and most importantly added to in the light of some of the studies on Williams of recent years. It therefore provides a relatively succinct, if still massive summary, of Ryan's many academic studies of Trinidad and Tobago, supplemented by insights generated by his regular weekly newspaper columns and his position as a close observer of Trinidad's political affairs, with access to many of those who worked closely with Williams during his period of political office. It is for this reason the most important single book to appear to date on the political life of Trinidad and Tobago under Williams and it necessarily marks an important point of departure, or more accurately the indispensable starting point, to understanding politics in Trinidad and Tobago in the Williams era.

The review is divided in three parts. The first considers the structure

and content of the book, identifying some of the important conclusions that Ryan reaches on Williams' involvement in setting the political agenda and determining the political outcomes. The second discusses some of the controversial issues surrounding Williams' personality and how this contributed to the way he engaged in politics and related to others. The final part situates the book within the existing scholarship on Williams discussing how it adds to it and to our understanding of politics in Trinidad and Tobago under Williams.

### Structure and Content

Ryan organises the book in seven parts. The first deals with his 'Early Years.' It discusses Williams' family background, his education and his scholarship. His sources include material from the Eric Williams Memorial Collection (EWMC) at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad as well as various published accounts, including Williams' autobiography *Inward Hunger* (1969). The most novel aspect is the importance which Ryan attaches to Williams' 'black' French creole background, which is often glossed over in other studies. Given the importance of French creoles in Trinidad society and particularly Williams' conflicts with them over the years this is an intriguing dimension. I would have appreciated more information on this subject, particularly when he raises it in the context of one of Williams' most controversial speeches "Massa Day Done" (1961) where Williams excoriates the 'white' French creoles and other colonial minded people in Trinidad opposed to independence. Ryan speculates: "Here perhaps is the 'smoking gun' that links Williams's status as a frustrated black French creole to his political and social war against the white French creoles who had refused to treat him and his immediate family as part of the kin" (p. 290). Was the rejection of his family by the white French creoles one of the 'many grudges' which Williams was said by others to carry all his life and if so how did it affect his behaviour and judgement? Ryan does not tell us but given the racial complexity of Trinidad it is an intriguing question, particularly since Williams was an adept player of "the race card" in securing advantage in Trinidad's politics.

The other subject in the first part is a review of the reviews of William's scholarship. Ryan presents the views of Williams' critics as well as his supporters. He does not go into this in any great detail and to be fair to him this is a massive topic, which in terms of Williams' most influential book *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), has already spawned three major international academic conferences.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Ryan focuses on whether Williams was a "scholar's scholar or a nationalist scholar." This is an important distinction to make, particularly if one is seeking

to understand how Williams' academic work informed his political views. Ryan notes that opinions vary on this topic and quotes C.L.R. James' observation that "Williams was not an original thinker" (p. 55). I do not think this view can stand in the light of *Capitalism and Slavery* but it is true, as Ryan observes, that Williams "sought to occupy two stools, the intellectual and the political, and in the end found himself caught between them" (p. 55). That is, Williams' scholarship later came to serve explicitly political ends and its rigour suffered in consequence, but it was still robust and forceful enough to command attention and respect. I therefore agree with Ryan's concluding comment "that one cannot proceed very far with an analysis of Caribbean (and not merely West Indian) political and social history without encountering Williams, and without taking a position for or against some aspect of his work" (p. 57). That is how history should be and as such Williams served his academic discipline well.

The second, third and fourth parts are, with some exceptions, drawn largely from Ryan's *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (1972), his first and up till this one his best book on Trinidad and Tobago. In the "Introduction" Ryan notes that this book is now out of print and he had often been asked to reissue it but that he had "resisted these invitations because I had always regarded it as incomplete and in need of revision and updating" (p. 2). *Eric Williams: the Myth and the Man* appears to constitute such a revision and updating.

The first point to note is that some chapters are reproduced almost unchanged from *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago*. Again Ryan acknowledges this in his "Introduction" when he notes that for some chapters "little new material is available to alter the basic conclusions" (p. 4) but then he adds "In most cases however, I wrote completely new sections or new chapters because these issues were either not dealt with in that book, or not adequately so" (p. 4). Ryan has indeed done this to some degree but to my mind he raises as many issues as he clarifies. For example, one of his revisions found in a number of places is to substitute the word "Williams" for the "PNM" or "Williams" for the "government" at the beginning or at some point in a paragraph. Does Ryan do this because he is writing a book on Williams or is it because he now has knowledge that Williams played a greater part than he thought when he originally wrote *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago*? If it is the former then it is understandable in context but if it is the latter then it does raise many interesting questions which suggest a more thorough revision of *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* than is attempted here. In particular it suggests the total domination by Williams of the PNM and the government from the very beginning, something which was not so strongly stressed in the original *Race and*

*Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago.*

The second point, and in support of Ryan's identification of the early dominance of Williams, is that in his revisions Ryan introduces material, particularly memoirs and reminiscences of people then close to Williams, not available when *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* was originally published. These include, among others, books by ex-ministers such as Winston Mahabir (1978), Patrick Solomon (1981), Donald Granado's manuscript (1987), and Hamid Ghany's biography of Kamaluddin Mohammed (1996). These do add richness to the narrative and also differing, and occasionally even contradictory accounts. Leaving aside the fact that these accounts may be self-serving by those that wrote them, they provide an opportunity for Ryan to interrogate the record more closely and to arrive at a balanced judgement. This is not an easy task and it is one which Ryan does not always follow through to a firm conclusion, which is a matter of regret as he is at the moment the most well informed commentator on Trinidad and Tobago's political system in the Williams era. For example while he condemns Solomon for painting a "one-dimensional portrait" (p. 97) of Williams we do not have his views on some of the other accounts which he cites extensively in various parts of the book, especially that of Mahabir on which Ryan draws for insights on East Indian perceptions of Williams and on Williams' character.

That said, we do find new material that confirms many of the points made in *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago*. These include the dominance of black middle class persons from Port of Spain in the early formation of the People's National Movement (PNM), the party Williams founded and led, and the very few people of East Indian descent to be found in its ranks; the dominance of Williams within the PNM, including virtually sole authorship of many of its key documents, including the People's Charter which set out its founding principles; the creation of the PNM as a movement which had a nationalist, not a socialist vision, in part because Williams was by inclination "a reformist...interested in nationalist and not class politics" (p. 114); and the view that, "in the pre-independence period, neither Williams nor his followers understood the political psychology of the Hindus in Trinidad" (p. 317).

Ryan also repeats, again with some new information added, the analysis of the campaigns fought by Williams at this time against the Catholic Church, against the model of federation supported by the British, against the United States for the return of their base at Chaguaramas as the site for the federal capital, and against those opposing independence. He also discusses the elections of 1956, 1958 and crucially 1961. In all of these events Ryan demonstrates that Williams plays the pivotal role and there can be little dissent from this view, though there is one interesting

observation of Williams' political style that does emerge: his willingness to compromise when faced with powerful opponents. We see this in his discussions around the formation of a government following the 1956 elections; the settlement of the dispute over Chaguaramas, deemed a "sell-out" by C.L.R. James and others; and his "strategic retreat" (p. 276) on the concordat with the Catholic Church, "an issue that had been assumed to be non-negotiable" (p. 276). It also emerges in the talks in London in 1962 on the independence constitution in concessions made by Williams to accommodate primarily the East Indian opposition. We know from the account given by Ryan that Williams found it hard to accept "set-backs." So what prompted these compromises: necessity, grudgingly given, or the greater good, a sign of statesmanship? It is possible from Ryan's account to construct a case for both, so perpetuating the "myth" and the "enigma" that is Eric Williams.

The fifth and sixth parts of the book examine Williams' record of government once independence was obtained. They draw on various studies written by Ryan and various conferences and symposia he organised at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad, including one held in 1991 entitled "Eric Williams in Retrospect: the Williams Legacy Ten Years Later," the proceedings of which have not been published but which Ryan uses extensively. Also of note are the various reminiscences and interpretations of Williams published in two volumes of *Caribbean Issues* (1999) which he uses to good effect.

Ryan begins his account of these years with a chapter on "Cabinet and Party in Independence." This seeks to explain Williams' domination of the political system, the PNM and of public opinion. In it he notes the ascendancy of the cabinet over the PNM and the PNM over public opinion, or at least that section of it which saw Williams as a charismatic leader. The key to this was deference to a higher body and ultimately of the cabinet to Eric Williams. Who was to blame for this state of affairs? It is difficult to reach a judgement. Williams, by temperament, was reasonably content with this in spite of his many calls for "political education" and so could be said to be complicit by omission, but then so were many others. In the early years of independence it appeared to work reasonably well, although with time it began to unravel as difficulties crowded in on the government and disenchantment set in among some of Williams' former supporters, dramatically demonstrated in the Black Power events of 1970. The best that can be said is that Williams' domination of those around him was not by force but by authority and by consent, although Ryan does demonstrate that Williams could create a climate of fear and distrust among his colleagues if it suited his purposes. As such, the leadership of Eric Williams must to some extent be understood as a "sociological phenomenon" independent of his own will and conditioned

by the actions of those around him and the situation in which he found himself. It is not the independent variable it is sometimes presented to be but more an example, as Ryan puts it, of “the ‘institutional charisma’ of the old colonial governor who was to be congratulated and flattered but not criticised” (p. 339). Leadership in such situations needs to be carefully analysed and accounted for.

Ryan follows this chapter with others on economic policy, the Black Power events and gathering opposition to Williams, his surprise decision to step down from power (and his equally surprising return), on constitution reform, on his conflict with the PNM (in which he sought to exercise absolute control over it in the face of gathering criticism), on his relations with his senior civil servants (whom he sought to manipulate and destroy if they became too powerful), on education and culture, and finally, and too briefly, on foreign policy. Together they provide an excellent commentary on politics in these years although there are two surprise omissions which do warrant greater attention than given by Ryan: the position of Tobago and Williams’ engagement with the rest of the Caribbean. While, admittedly, these latter two were not priorities of Williams in his later years (because he felt slighted by both?) they nevertheless deserve a more extended treatment than given here, particularly in the light of Williams’ earlier beliefs in the virtues of a “unitary” state and in the promotion of a vibrant pan-Caribbeanism.

What do we learn of Williams from these chapters? On economic policy the message is fairly clear. Ryan argues Williams was “a pragmatist not a socialist” (p. 473), informed by a wider vision of establishing in Trinidad and Tobago “capitalism with a human face” (p. 512). He therefore “zig-zagged” (p. 494) on the issue of public ownership, now endorsing it and now rejecting it, with one eye on how it would be viewed by the public. This led Ryan to also conclude that on issues such as nationalisation “he may be defined more accurately as a populist” (p. 509) than a socialist and in the field of energy policy as an “opportunist” (p. 531), if sometimes a reluctant one.

In respect of opposition, both outside and inside the PNM, Williams was calculating and manipulative at one and the same time, co-opting others or their ideas if necessary. This is clear in several episodes. First, in respect of the Black Power events of 1970 where Ryan demonstrates that Williams did not panic, as some have suggested, but rather held his nerve, riding out the crisis and eventually translating some of its demands into policy. Second, in relation to his proposed “resignation” as prime minister, Ryan believes it was genuine, because Williams “was a profoundly depressed and disillusioned man...overwhelmed by a sense of heroic failure and under severe pressure from his beloved daughter” (p. 440). He changed his mind when the “overnight” tripling of the price



of oil “provided a life raft by which he could return” (p. 440) and when he was able to orchestrate it in such a manner that all his principal demands were met—a view with which I concur. Lastly, there is the example of the 1976 election campaign, when he turned on the PNM denouncing five of his ministers as ‘millstones’ and refusing to campaign on their behalf. While Ryan makes the point that in this instance Williams did not get it all his own way he notes that his strategy “was to affect a presidential style of leadership” (p. 471) which distanced himself from the PNM and government and which ultimately was very successful in returning the PNM to power again. Williams was also able to impose at this time an undated signed letter of resignation on all PNM parliamentary candidates to be held by him as a form of discipline against them should any challenge him once elected.

Similar themes of opportunism and personal domination also emerge in Ryan’s chapter on constitutional reform and that on Williams’ treatment of his senior civil servants. The latter is an excellent chapter which draws extensively on the reminiscences of the key civil servants he used and abused over the years. At the beginning Ryan makes the point that “almost every senior public servant and minister ended up as a casualty” (p. 543) of Williams’ displeasure with only two from a very long list avoiding this fate. It extended to the very highest, including at one stage his permanent secretary, Dodderidge Alleyne, who was then head of the civil service. In trying to explain why Williams acted as he did Ryan notes that Williams had “a seemingly incurable weakness for believing much of what he was told and acting upon it in a paranoid way” (p. 557). If this was indeed the case it shows weakness and insecurity more than it shows strength and decisiveness. He also speculates that “Williams was acting irrationally as a result of the psychiatric condition from which he was said to be suffering” (p. 558) and cites the views of a minister who worked closely with him to the effect that “Williams was an insecure, suggestible, paranoid, suspicious and emotionally unstable individual who had great difficulty handling human relations” (p. 559). These are unpalatable insights not far short of character assassination. That does not make them any the less untrue and it is indisputable that decision making in Trinidad and Tobago had by this time become “too centralised and personalised” (p. 569), demonstrated in one telling statistic: that the number of notes to Cabinet for decision had by 1981 reached 5,159 (comparable figures for Jamaica and the UK were 676 and 59 respectively) (p. 559). They show a public service unprepared to take routine decisions for fear of getting it wrong and earning prime ministerial displeasure or worse and a political system that could simply seize up in the face of the demands made on it. Ryan concludes his chapter with the observation that: “Whatever talents Williams had, and he had



many, managerial capacity was clearly not one of them" (p. 569). On the evidence he produces it is difficult to do anything else but agree.

The remaining chapters in these sections deal with foreign policy, on which Ryan says very little, largely setting out Williams' views on the subject as presented in various speeches, and on education and culture. The latter are matters on which Williams had a greater interest and on which he had written extensively before coming into politics. Williams therefore had a vision of what he wanted to achieve but he encountered great difficulties in putting it into practice. Ryan suggests there were many reasons for this, many of which had nothing to do with Williams and everything to do with the society at large. As he puts it: "Williams was ambitious and eager for change, but the problems were bigger than he was and would have required more human resources than he had at his disposal" (p. 588). Ryan therefore concludes that on education Williams was "a heroic failure" (p. 587) although he also notes that for many in the country who benefitted from them his education reforms "were his most outstanding contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago" (p. 583). Williams would have been pleased with this judgement by the people of Trinidad and Tobago however imperfect the end results came to be.

The final section discusses "Williams: the Myth and the Man". The chapters are necessarily wide ranging and consider, in order, whether Williams was a democrat or an autocrat, what the calypsonians thought of him, how Williams assessed his own record in 1980, corruption and sleaze surrounding his governments, controversies surrounding his final days and unexpected death, and the views of some of those close to him as to his character, including importantly those of his daughter Erica. He ends with a discussion of Williams' personality, including the controversial issue of whether Williams was psychologically ill or not, and concludes with a final chapter giving Ryan's assessment of his achievements and failures. For the moment I will focus only on one: the issue of corruption, discussing some of the others in the next section.

"Morality in Public Affairs" was one of the key issues and campaigning slogans when the PNM was first formed in 1956. In 1981, when Williams died, the "sleaze and immorality in public affairs," as Ryan titles his chapter on corruption, had become one of the most controversial issues surrounding Williams' political leadership. The evidence of corruption is equivocal in many cases and compelling in some, not against Williams but those who surrounded him, and in particular John O'Halloran, one of Williams' ministers and a man Ryan describes as "clearly the most powerful political personality in the regime apart from Williams himself" (p. 714). The fact that Williams could so indulge his "number two" is an interesting observation and raises many issues.

Did Williams know? Did he want to know? Was he involved himself? Did O'Halloran have something on Williams that Williams wanted to keep secret? The speculation could be endless and indeed it has been in Trinidad and Tobago, both when Williams was in power and after. Ryan notes that A.N.R. Robinson, who in the 1960s was thought to be Williams' likely successor, sought to establish the truth about corruption under Williams when he himself became Prime Minister in 1986 but that by 1990 the investigation had foundered "inviting the accusation that in spite of all the allegations about corruption that had been made about Williams and the PNM, it was not able to prove anything" (p. 704). Yet corruption there was (and still is) and Ryan details the cases of Trinidad-Tesoro and the DC-9 scandal to show that it did occur. The most likely truth is that Williams did know but did nothing about it. The much touted Integrity Commission Williams campaigned on in 1976 was established but then ignored and Williams could use the fact that he knew those around him were corrupt to get his own way. It would be at one with his political managerial style. On Williams himself Ryan concludes: "we have no justiciable evidence that convicts Williams or proves that he ever asked for or received a bribe" (p. 714). Note the use of the word "justiciable," it suggests Ryan believes Williams would be found "not guilty" in a court of law but against the less exacting standards of public opinion (and possibly even history) the case is more open, although I believe one in which Williams would ultimately be cleared.

### Personality and Politics

Eric Williams and Barack Obama have one thing in common: they both penned autobiographies before they formally entered politics. Barack Obama published his *Dreams from my Father* (1995) the year before he was elected to the Illinois State Senate and Eric Williams drafted the first third of his autobiography *Inward Hunger* (1969) while he was still at the Caribbean Commission. Did both men have a sense of destiny? Or have they both a massive ego? On Obama we will have to reserve judgement but on Williams we know, as he wrote in his autobiography, that he believed "Greatness Trinidad Style was thrust upon me from the cradle" (cited in Ryan p. 11). How did Williams' personality shape and colour the politics of Trinidad and Tobago?

Ryan discusses this issue at a number of points, many of which we have already mentioned. However he reserves his major discussion to the final section "The Myth and the Man" on which I want to focus on three elements: Williams as autocrat or democrat, Williams as psychologically unstable, and lastly the political legacy of Williams.

In 1971 Williams is famously reported in the U.S. magazine *Newsweek*

(7 June) as saying: "I'm the one who has power here. When I say 'come', you 'cometh', and when I say 'go', you 'goeth'" (p. 412). In many ways Williams was only stating the truth as at that time, Ryan notes he was "minister of national security, minister of finance, minister of planning and development, minister of local government, minister of Tobago affairs, and minister of external affairs" (p. 406). But more generally the comment is taken as a sign that Williams not only wanted "absolute power," but enjoyed power absolutely. Ryan himself notes that Williams was "congenitally incapable of any real decentralisation of power" (p. 415), the view also of many of those close to him as ministers and senior civil servants. At the same time Ryan argues that Williams never interfered with judicial decisions, allowed a free and critical press, tolerated dissent (but not disorder) in the streets, and refused in his last days to name a "successor". These are not the actions and beliefs of a dictator and if Williams did hold all these ministerial posts prior to the 1971 elections he shed them all immediately after retaining only that of prime minister. The reality is that it was Williams' style which was "politically amoral" (p. 755) that has come in for censure and not his beliefs, around which he remained consistent and democratic in essence. In the meantime he could be autocratic but this was supported by the charismatic power he held, the institutional structure he inherited and even the small size of the country he governed. They are givens in the political systems of all the Commonwealth Caribbean countries and Williams' record as a prime minister bears comparison with all of his peers in the region. Indeed he emerges with a stronger record on fostering democracy than most of them, despite the temptations and circumstances in which he found himself.

The issue of "psychological illness" is more disturbing and more controversial. The state of Eric Williams' "state of mind" was on occasion hinted at or obliquely referred to before his death but only came to the fore following it when commentators and those close to him sought to account for why Williams had died, deliberately or otherwise, of an "undiagnosed diabetic coma" in a situation bordering on neglect. Ryan discusses these issues at several points at length and summarises much of the debate in his section on "the bipolarity hypothesis". Here he notes that while "medical practitioners disagree sharply as to whether or not Williams was mentally ill" (p. 773) there is a great deal of evidence by those who worked closely with him that he was prone to mood swings and exhibited a work style that suggested he suffered from "bipolar disorder" (more popularly described as manic-depression). In this there are alternating periods of great energy and creativeness followed by periods of deep depression and comparative inactivity, along with examples of paranoia and other forms of irrational behaviour. There

is a degree of consensus that following his decision in 1973 to remain in power Williams became, in the words of his closest daughter, Erica, “a very reclusive, meditative and further disappointed man” (cited in Ryan p. 755) but whether this was enough to prompt “altruistic suicide” (p. 715) as Anthony Maingot later described it, remains open to question.<sup>4</sup> I saw Williams on three occasions at Easter in 1980 when I was preparing, with his participation, the book of speeches and writings published as *Forged from the Love of Liberty* (Sutton 1981). I can attest that in the privacy of his own home he appeared to be neglectful of his person and most probably reclusive, but he was intellectually very capable, taking me to task for not keeping up with the latest debates on slavery, and he was very commanding in the presence of those ministers who attended these meetings. Like so much of Williams’ behaviour this observation of mine allows for contrary conclusions to be drawn. I think that Ryan has reached a defensible conclusion in his statement “that a depressed Williams became suicidal and chose to let nature take its course” (p. 721), but it is not a definitive conclusion, which at any rate the passing of time and consequent lack of new evidence may now prevent us from ever being able to reach.

Lastly, what is to be made of Williams’ political legacy? In 1980 Williams presented his own assessment in the form of an Address to the annual convention of the PNM. Ryan discusses it and makes the point that compared to the Address to the PNM he made in 1973, which “reeked of unequivocal personal failure and defeat” (p. 691), that of 1980 was more triumphal with Williams claiming “that he and the party had fulfilled much of what they had set out to achieve in 1956” (p. 691). This is a remarkable claim many politicians might make but very few could meet. What is Ryan’s own assessment as set out in the final chapter of his book? In some ways it mirrors that of Williams. The legacy has its positive side, for example, in the achievement of independence, the creation of party politics, the promotion of liberal democracy, the advancement of women, the transformation of education, and the creation of a national energy sector. But it also had its negative side in the failure of Federation, the exclusion of East Indians and the mishandling of the economy outside of the energy sector, including relations with the trade unions. These are fair judgements to which Ryan also adds Williams’ failure to seriously confront corruption, his failure as a political manager and his inability to pioneer and sustain credible administrative reform in the face of recurring crises. Nevertheless Ryan can conclude that Williams “left Trinidad and Tobago better than he found it in 1956, leaving indelible footprints on our landscape” (p. 786). The balance is right and it is tempting to believe that the two hundred thousand of his fellow citizens who filed past Williams’ coffin as it lay in state shared it as well. In all it

is a remarkable living epitaph bestowed on very few of his fellow Caribbean leaders and bodes well, as Williams himself may have remarked, for his place in history. After all, from what we know of his personality, Williams would have thought he had earned it!

### Scholarship on Williams and Beyond

The scholarship on Eric Williams is now considerable. A glance at Ryan's bibliography lists a large number of books, articles, memoirs, and the like. Ryan uses many in his book but not all and not always to the best effect. He discusses Williams' charisma (pp. 766-767) but he does not do it through the work of Ivar Oxaal who in his book *Black Intellectuals Come to Power: The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (1968) presented the first and to date best study of Williams as a charismatic leader. He also misses an opportunity in not integrating the insights of Ken Boodhoo's study *The Elusive Eric Williams* (2001) more fully into his work to explain the twists and turns of Williams' complex personality. And again the painstaking work of Colin Palmer in the British and US archives as reported in his *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (2006) complements the picture from sources outside the country which could have been better used to fill out the picture on Federation, Chaguaramas, the independence settlement with the UK, and relations with Grenada and British Guiana among other themes.

Ryan also does not address some of the academic work on Trinidad politics under Williams. His references to the work of John LaGuerre, a fellow academic at the UWI for much the same period as Ryan, is largely absent but needs to be consulted if any real insights on East Indian attitudes to Williams are to be gained. The work of Selwyn Cudjoe (1983, 1993) also only gets brief mention and that of Scott B. Macdonald (1986) none at all, yet the latter's assertion on the 'middle classization' of the entire country by 1981 is resonant with that of Ryan who claims that Williams in 1970 was in many ways too supportive of the "middle class that brought him to power" (p. 403) at the expense of "the black masses in whose name they governed" (p. 403). Indeed, the whole debate on race and class could have been explored further not least because Ryan asserts at several points in his book, and particularly in the context of his discussion of C.L.R. James and his Workers and Farmers Party (WFP), that "race was a more critical variable than class" (p. 377) and that in the election of 1966: "The WFP's failure [was] that it sought to be a class-based party in a society where race trumped everything" (p. 377). In particular, Ryan makes the claim, italicised in the book, that "ethnicity is the dominant variable in the political life of Trinidad and Tobago" (p. 262), a view which Ryan has held steadfastly in all his

years as a political commentator. He is, of course, entitled to this view but it can cloud alternative interpretations. For example, Ryan notes on four separate occasions the tendency of Williams to “zig-zag” in policy directions which he attributes to Williams’ political style. But could they not be just the manifest contradictions of class in political action and especially those of the petty bourgeoisie who Williams represented and who, beginning with Marx and later in the Caribbean context with C.L.R. James, is seen as a class notorious for its vacillation?

The problem here is the intent of the book: is it primarily a political biography of Williams or a political history of Trinidad and Tobago under Williams? It is, of course, both but to bring this off is a difficult task since different materials are needed to support different facets. Ryan makes a very good job of it and in fact a remarkable job in keeping it to only 842 pages. The book fits very well into his extensive corpus of work and is a very reliable guide to Williams and to the government and politics of Trinidad and Tobago in the Williams era. I cannot recommend it more highly to students of and in the Caribbean, to the academic community, and to the informed public in Trinidad and Tobago. But it does not solve the riddle or enigma of Williams and occasionally falls short on analysis. There is much we still need to know.

One is the “what if” question. In his autobiography Williams makes much of his failure to obtain a fellowship at All Souls College in Oxford. What if he had done so? Similarly, “what if” his contract had been renewed at the Caribbean Commission in 1955 and more importantly he had been offered promotion within it? We can only conjecture both points since we are still without a full published account of Williams’ Oxford years and his work in the Caribbean Commission. Ryan, as others have done, largely relies on Williams’ autobiography and material in the EWMC but that is clearly insufficient to reach a sound judgement on these matters. I, for one, still do not know if for Dr. Eric Williams politics was “a second best.”

Another is Williams in a comparative context. Ryan briefly compares him to Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore (pp. 657-658) and I have done so to Nehru (Sutton 1986). I have also compared him to Walter Rodney (Sutton 1992) and Maingot (1992) to Juan Bosch. James famously did so in his *Convention Appraisal* of 1960 when he made the “primary generalisation” which still stands: “Dr. Williams is a post-war nationalist politician in an underdeveloped colonial territory which is still not independent” (James 1993 [1960], p. 330). In itself that tells us a great deal but explicitly comparing Williams to others also tells us a bit more and crucially allows us to determine how distinctive or otherwise Williams was as a scholar and as a statesman. We therefore need more comparative analysis to situate him in time and place more accurately.

Lastly, Ryan has done a magnificent job in marshalling published and unpublished work on Williams to present a very credible picture of Williams the man and Williams the politician. But what he has not done is enter into the archives of the PNM and of the Trinidad and Tobago government to examine the primary documentation which would provide considerably more detail on what decisions were made, when and why. Was it always Eric Williams as dominant and was it at all times and in all matters or was there, as Ryan has written elsewhere, “The Limits on Executive Power” (1986). When and on what did Williams compromise, when and why did he retreat and when did he simply walk away? To know this would be to not only know a lot more about politics in Trinidad and Tobago but a lot more about the “myth and the man” which is the subtitle to his book.

In the final analysis this book therefore presents us with “unfinished business.” There may be real difficulties in getting access to the PNM and government archives but it should be attempted. It is a job for the next generation of Caribbean students. In their endeavours they should be guided first and foremost by this book. It has been a mighty labour to produce and we are in debt to Ryan for attempting the task. It is not without its faults, but it also has its many merits, and in this sense it is a true echo of its subject. It is a real and lasting achievement for which we should be grateful and for which Selwyn Ryan deserves our heartfelt thanks.

### Notes

- \* In the year of the 50th anniversary of Trinidad and Tobago’s independence, and because of the importance of Eric Williams in that country’s history, and for Caribbean history, the Editorial Board of *Caribbean Studies* made an exception in its policy deciding to publish this extended review of one single book. The book reviewed is authored by one of the most important commentators on Williams and the review was written by a leading scholar in Caribbean politics who was also the last academic to work closely with Williams before his death in 1981.

- <sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this review was first given as a paper to the conference “Independence and After: Dr. Eric Williams and the Making of Trinidad and Tobago,” Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London, 27 September 2011. The conference was convened to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Eric Williams and was part supported by a grant from the Eric Williams Memorial



Collection.

- <sup>2</sup> A select bibliography is to be found in Paul K. Sutton, compiler and editor, *Forged From the Love of Liberty: Selected Speeches of Dr. Eric Williams* (Trinidad: Longman Caribbean, 1981). A more comprehensive bibliography compiled by Patricia Raymond is available on line at <www.library2.nalis.gov.tt>.
- <sup>3</sup> The conferences were “British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams,” at the Rockefeller Conference and Study Centre, Bellagio, Italy, in 1984; “Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later,” at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1996; and “New Perspectives on the Life and Work of Eric Williams,” at St. Catherine’s College, Oxford University, in 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Ryan cites an article by Maingot in the *Trinidad Guardian* 25 April 1984 as the basis of this view. In fact, Maingot first mentions this possibility in a review of *Forged from the Love of Liberty* (1981) published in *Nieuwe West Indische Gids/New West Indian Guide* (Maingot 1983:93).

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