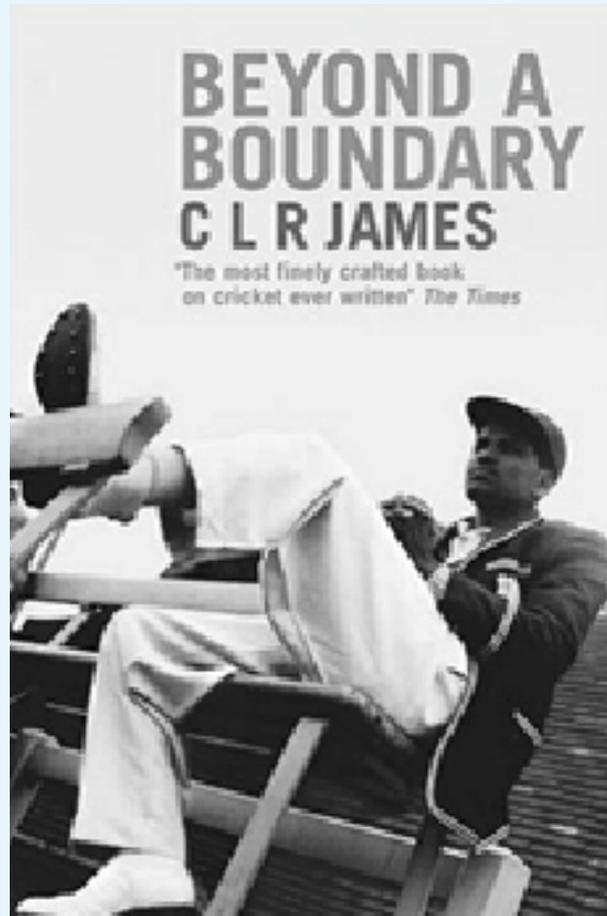


Can cricket be an agent of change, and break barriers?

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Beyond a Boundary

C.L.R. James

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One thing is certain. *Beyond a Boundary* is neither a ghost-written celebrity biography, nor a cash-in publication following the economic rise of the postcolonials in cricket, particularly the Indian subcontinent. A stark contrast to the lassitude and superficiality of the contemporary sports writing—often a compliant servant of the profit mongers, C.L.R. James’ (1901-1989) *Beyond a Boundary* explores the place of cricket in the Caribbean and England, arguing that what happened inside the “boundary line” in cricket affected and was a reflection of life beyond it. The new edition of C.L.R. James’ 1963 book came out recently to celebrate fifty years since its first publication, and fittingly at a time when cricket has become a multi-million dollar industry with far-reaching social and economic ramifications seemingly as never before: corruptions are abound, books cooked, matches fixed, performances enhanced and much more. James has not talked about all these issues, but points out, carefully and provocatively, how the sport mirrors the complex nature of the society and the time in which it lives. During the course of the book’s 260 odd pages, he has combined his incisive sociological analysis and fervent passion for cricket, which in his words, “neither cricket reminiscences nor autobiography.”

Does one have to be a cricket fan to appreciate *Beyond a Boundary*? Although the book contains an introductory note that explains the basic rules of the game, some interest in the historicity of the game is probably warranted. James asks the seething question “what do they know of cricket, who only cricket know”, that captures his purpose of making connections between cricket and its politico-historical variables. He begins with the place of cricket in his family history, in his childhood and schooling in Trinidad, and in the social stratification of the West Indian society. He was born into the Black middle-classes of that island and his gifts for literature and sport earned him a scholarship to the local public school as well as a chance to play in the thriving post World War One Trinidadian cricket scene. It was there that he encountered a number of the great West Indian players from the era approaching their introduction into the test arena. This section of the book shows how his schooling, and in particular cricket, instilled a code of ethics that were to stay with him for the rest of his life. The obeying of umpiring decisions, subordinating personal desire for the sake of the team, not complaining about misfortune, and of most significance to the pre-independence Trinidad, restraint and loyalty. James then recounts his personal experiences of some of the great West Indian cricketers, including George John, Wilton St Hill, and Learie Constantine. In the three essays on Constantine, his personal friend, James also discusses league cricket and his own move to England, and to a society whose class divisions he likens to those of the West Indies. An essay on George Headley, the former West Indian Captain, provides an interlude before James moves on to talk about W.G. Grace, the legendary English cricketer, as both player and a change-maker in the ‘elitist’ English cricket on the verge of the Victorian era. This is followed by a somewhat over the top argument that cricket is a form of art. He begins with a general argument for

the importance of sport in social history, going back to its Greek roots, to the Olympic games and then compares the dramatic qualities of cricket to the Athenian drama. The text eventually comes to a full circle as it returns to the West Indies of the late 1950s with the two final chapters covering the unrest during an English tour of the West Indies in 1960, and more generally the complex interaction of race and politics of the West Indian cricket, in such matters as the selection of teams and captains. James mounts a powerful manifesto, at least as so appears, for Frank Worell to become the first full-time 'Black' captain of the West Indies.

Selma James, CLR's wife, writing in *The Guardian* (2 April, 2013), believes that this is a book he "had to" write: "he considered himself more scrupulous about the game's technique ... saw the game not only as it was played but as it was lived." In "Writing the modern game" (from Bateman and Hill [eds.], *Cambridge Companion to Cricket*, 2011), Rob Stein asserted that the first cricket writers to see cricket beyond its two-dimensions were Neville Cardus and Raymond Robertson-Glasgow, but"(n) either, though, went beyond the field of play to see the place where the cricketer was born and brought up, where he went to school or what community he represented" (p.238). C.L.R. James, Stein believes, was "the first to see and write about cricketers in their social context". However, one has to remember that *Beyond a Boundary* was written in 1963 with passages from articles by the author that pre-date the book's publication. Inevitably therefore, there are times when the language feels dated, and discussions of negative tactics and attitudes in the late 1950s, the reader might feel, are overshadowed by the increased tempo of the game as it is now played. Similarly, the rise and fall of the West Indies cricket, the economics of the game, the instant gratification formula are all new developments that 'modern' cricket has been through since the first publication of the book. Yet, *Beyond a Boundary* retains subjects that benefit from shattering boundaries and remains relevant for today's cricket lovers. Readers are invited to see cricket beyond the constraints of the stadium, and explore its diverse interconnections, without which, James argues, we are prevented from knowing our own reality-what do they know of cricket, or anything, if it is walled off from every other aspect of life and struggle? So my final verdict is, this is perhaps not the book to take to a match and flick through in-between deliveries, rather here is a book that demands to be read at leisure, with enough time to mull over the serious issues that it contains.