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Introduction: Symposium on the Life and Writings of Eric Williams

Author(s): Erica Williams Connell

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**SYMPOSIUM ON
ERIC EUSTACE WILLIAMS**



Photo of Eric Eustace Williams courtesy of the Eric Williams Memorial Collection.

INTRODUCTION: SYMPOSIUM ON THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF ERIC WILLIAMS

by Erica Williams Connell*

"History . . . to inform of [the] past as an essential guide to . . . future action."

—Eric Williams, 31 August 1962

Earlier versions of the following three papers were presented at the 87th annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), held in Orlando, Florida, in October 2002. The session was devoted to "*The Papers of Eric Williams: Challenges and Opportunities for the 21st Century*," and was chaired by Professor Learie Luke of South Carolina State University. In their presentations Professors Selwyn Carrington, Howard University; David Barry Gaspar, Duke University; and Tony Martin, Wellesley College confirm that Eric Williams by his mindset, writings, and activism belongs squarely within the pantheon of African American notables, albeit hailing from the West Indies. Williams was the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and remained in office for a quarter of a century until his death in 1981. He not only led his country to independence from Great Britain (1962) and to republicanism (1976), but was also deeply involved in the movement for Caribbean integration and cooperation from the early 1940s, and was highly respected internationally, serving as one of the founding members of the Governing Council of the United Nations University headquartered in Japan. He was also at one time president of La Société Africaine de Culture in Paris, France—otherwise known as *Présence Africaine*—which was associated with President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, and although the mission never materialized, Williams was one of only four Commonwealth Prime Ministers selected to visit Vietnam, in hopes of mediating that years-long conflict.

A noted historian, Williams by most accounts defined the study and greatly affected the writing of Caribbean history when he published his 1944 classic, *Capitalism & Slavery*, an expanded version of his doctoral dissertation. By that time, Williams was Associate Professor of Social and Political Science at Howard University, where he compiled and edited its earliest three-volume social sciences textbook. Professor Martin's well-documented essay "Eric Williams and the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission: Trinidad's Future Nationalist Leader as Aspiring Imperial Bureaucrat, 1942–1944" vividly captures the high-powered circles in which Williams traveled in the 1940s and his eventual appointment to this internationally influential commission. Martin paints a

*Erica Williams Connell is the daughter of Eric Williams and is associated with the Eric Williams Memorial Collection at the University of the West Indies, Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

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picture of Williams both as scholar and activist who remained attached to his Caribbean roots and who used his position on the commission to demonstrate and advance his knowledge, research, and connections to the region in order to articulate the aspirations of his people.

"They could never have too much of my work" was how Williams characterized his relationship in the 1940s with Dr. Carter G. Woodson and the prestigious *Journal of Negro History*. David Barry Gaspar's essay examines Williams' contributions to *The Journal of Negro History*, the first of which—"The Golden Age of the Slave System in Britain"—won the \$100.00 prize as the best article published in the journal in 1939. Well-prepared and documented, Williams' articles presented forceful arguments in support of his basic proposition that West Indian slavery and the slave trade were responsible for the rise of the British Industrial Revolution. This interpretation was considered revolutionary by many at that time, and thus Williams succeeded in catapulting himself to the attention of his regional and national constituencies as well as the colonial powers whose tug-of-war over the Caribbean would continue unchecked for decades. And the rest, as they say, is history. Indeed, this perspective is even more relevant than perhaps Williams himself would have imagined, given the current controversy igniting passions globally over reparations for enslaved workers and their descendants.

Selwyn Carrington's "*Capitalism & Slavery and Caribbean Historiography: An Evaluation*" describes how almost sixty years later, the book still informs the ongoing debate on the Atlantic Slave Trade. Carrington points out that a 1997 article in the *New York Times Book Review* referred to "The Williams Thesis" as "the cutting edge of slave trade research in academic circles." Williams documented the contribution of the sugar industry to capital formation in the Caribbean, Britain, and Europe, and demonstrated the importance of the slave trade, slavery, and the sugar industry to fueling capitalist growth in Europe. Carrington outlines some of the attempts over the years to refute the Williams thesis, with little lasting success. Carrington also examines Williams' minor themes and their impact on the subsequent development of research and writing on dependency theory, revolution and change (Haiti), labor exploitation, and the role of the Caribbean in world affairs. In addition, Carrington calls attention to the "palpable moral indignation" found in the pages of *Capitalism & Slavery*, which inspired later scholar activists committed to improving the social and economic conditions for peoples in developing nations victimized by globalization and corporate capitalism.

Each of these papers ably reflects the title given the session, which seeks to affirm the enduring importance of Williams' legacy and confirms the viability and significance of the Eric Williams Memorial Collection (EWMC), library and his archive. Inaugurated in 1998 at the Trinidad and Tobago campus of The University of the West Indies (UWI) by current U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, who heralded Dr. Williams as a tireless warrior in the battle against colonialism, among his many other achievements as a scholar, politician, and international statesman, the EWMC was named to UNESCO's prestigious *Memory of the World Register* in 1999. It is available for consultation by researchers and postgraduate students and consists of books and journals covering a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, religion, history, economics, politics, education, music, and art. With campuses in both Jamaica and Barbados, the EWMC is the UWI's largest collection, its "jewel in the crown."

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While some rare books of the 18th and 19th centuries enhance its intrinsic value, the EWMC's greatest strength is in the area of African and African American history, Williams' major academic interest. There is also a broad Caribbean sweep, multi-lingual and very comprehensive, the emphasis being not only on Afro-West Indian history, but on all the various groups in the region, including Amerindian, European, and East Indian.

As UWI Professor of History Brinsley Samaroo declared, "at a time when most Caribbean historians were concentrating on single colony's history or, at best . . . that of particular European nations in this region, Eric Williams' vision was [markedly] pan-Caribbean. In the Collection . . . for example, [can be found] Pierre Labat's *Voyages des les d'Amérique*, R. C. Dallas' early 18th Century *History of the Maroons*, Jose Marti's *Obras de Marti* and Dr. J. Graingers' 1764 poem *The Sugar Cane*, which gives an excellent description of the provenance of an early Caribbean plantation." Professor Samaroo continued:

The third emphasis in the Collection reflects Williams' . . . world view and his insatiable appetite . . . [for] all sorts of other non-historical matters. Like Nehru he had a fondness for poetry and for Robert Frost's soft nostalgic lines, *In the Clearing*. His library comprised Shakespeare, the English Romantics, and Derek Walcott, to name a few. Somewhere he picked up . . . a Nutrition Almanac and a Yoga of Meditation. There are at least eight different versions of the Bible and prints of the works of Rembrandt, Cezanne and Picasso. He clearly understood the importance of autographed copies of authors' works . . . which is why [there are] in the Collection, for example, John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, George Padmore's *Gold Coast Revolution* and Charles de Gaulle's *Mémoires de Guerre*. Williams [also] sought to understand the [East] Indian mind by reading, *in extenso*, the works of Gandhi, Nehru and Naipaul. The information he gleaned therefrom was reflected in [numerous] speeches, which also form part of the [EWMC].

The Williams' Papers [show that] he was a meticulous chronicler and keeper of snippets of information. [He regularly] record[ed] the speeches of opponents and on the copies provided, he marked off sections for later rebuttal. [His research] team . . . collected information on unemployment, crime, foreign relations, and education. These ideas he would then distill in the crucible of his historical mind and craft them into properly prepared, well-documented presentations. Quite often he wrote, then re-wrote speeches, leaving the various versions behind so that we can now trace the evolution of his thought. Sadly, our present generation of political leaders has no use for this careful, advanced preparation so we are constantly bombarded with . . . jokes, scandals and [the] general emptiness of speeches. In this latter practice, we are losing a glorious opportunity of using [these] as a vehicle of mass education.

The documentation included in the EWMC is categorized into six sections: Student, 1922–1939; Teacher, 1932, 1939–1948; International Civil Servant, 1943–1955; Scholar, 1939–1981; Prime Minister, 1954–1981; the Man (Diaries). The collection includes correspondence with heads of state as well as academic and activist colleagues, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, and Charles S. Johnson; published and unpublished manuscripts, research notes and photocopies of archival documents, drafts of historical writings, conference documents and a miscellany of reports, and publications on the birth

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of the People's National Movement (PNM), the political party Williams founded. There is also a substantial portion of the more than 600 speeches, documents, publications, lectures, and books that comprise Williams' bibliography.

The Eric Williams Memorial Collection is the first of its kind in the English-speaking Caribbean and regularly solicits material for deposit from individuals and organizations that, while added to it, remains separately identified. Thus, alongside Dr. Williams' personal library of some 7,000 volumes, there is now a modest, but current, body of work essentially focusing on West Indian history.

Dr. Colin Palmer, Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University, whose intellectual biography on Williams will soon be published and who, like Tony Martin, Selwyn Carrington and others, has conducted considerable research in the Collection, declared that "as a model for similar archival collections in the Caribbean . . . I remain very impressed by its breadth. . . . [It] is a national treasure."

An oral history project, budding photographic and newspaper clipping library, as well as more than 150 calypsoes with trenchant social commentary about Eric Williams' policies and persona, complement this extraordinarily rich archive. So, too, does a museum containing a wealth of emotive memorabilia of the period and copies of the seven translations (Russian, Chinese, and Japanese among them) of *Capitalism & Slavery*. The book will be re-published in Japanese in 2003 for the first time in decades.

Along with related artifacts, the museum displays photographs depicting the seven decades of Williams' life and contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago. It is organized around the themes of family, scholarship, statesmanship, education, industrial development, and politics. A three-dimensional replica of Williams' private study, with bottle of Quink ink and background classical music, vividly adding to the setting's authenticity, completes the exhibit, which is periodically opened to the general public. The museum is also available to high school students, and to date there have been visits from some sixty *different* schools, including three international institutions.

The EWMC is actively involved in the academic and Caribbean communities through Florida International University's annual *Eric E. Williams Memorial Lecture* in Miami; periodic scholarly conferences, such as the Eric Williams Symposium held in 2002 at New York's Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture; and an annual newsletter, among many other endeavors. A new initiative will see "Lesson Plans on Eric Williams" incorporated into Florida's state-mandated high-school curriculum, and other states will eventually be targeted for inclusion as well.

For information on the collection and its activities, as well as accessibility to the museum, library and archives, please contact: ewc.suilan@juno.com. Two websites, maintained by The University of the West Indies and the University of Florida respectively, www.mainlib.uwi.tt/eric.html; <http://palmm.fcla.edu/eew/>, provide up-to-date information on the collection.

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