

BOOK REVIEW

Selwyn Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man*, 2009, The University of the West Indies Press: Mona, Kingston, pp. 842, ISBN: 978-976-640-207-5.

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Eric Williams was undoubtedly one of the most outstanding Caribbean personalities of the last century. That is so because, at many levels, he was as much the author of history in the historiographical sense as its maker: more than ordinarily, he both wrote and made history. Williams was the author of several important publications on Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean, and *Capitalism and Slavery*, for example, first published in 1944, remains one of the most influential historical treatises on the region.

As Trinidad and Tobago's chief minister from 1956 to 1959, its first premier from 1959 to 1962, and its first prime minister from 1962, he dominated the country's politics until his death in 1981. He was unquestionably, the principal figure and force in the shaping of the governance and development of Trinidad and Tobago. Further, as a Caribbean head of government, he contributed significantly towards, and was at times key to the development of Caribbean nationalism and the relations among Caribbean states. At times, he also exerted considerable influence on relations between the Caribbean and the wider world. Given the many hats he wore and the many roles he played, Williams would have enunciated, written and done much for others to mull on during and after his lifetime.

Much has been and continues to be written about his life, both in academe and politics. But history is always the work of hindsight, and adopts new forms with the passage of time and, quite often, the availability of new materials. During his lifetime, the greater part of the scholarly response to Williams was centred around evaluation of his historical writings and their effect on the historiography *per se*. Along with such evaluations, were those works aimed primarily at assessing him as a politician and administrator. Such assessments, whether negative, positive or neutral, resulted naturally from the fact that he was a head of government, the leader of a political party, and was entitled to adoration or blame. Often, however, Williams's reading of history was incorporated as an explanation of his politics, including for example, his treatment of issues related to religion, race and class. Little effort was made to pursue a full and comprehensive history of Williams. This was a void to which Williams responded with the publication of his autobiography, *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister* (1969). It was a brilliantly written text which allowed him to set the tone for how he was to be viewed and understood: a masterly stroke of historiographical control from which successive historians have not managed to liberate themselves, despite their claims to the contrary. In the text, Williams alluded to the poverty endured by his family during his childhood and the prejudice he had experienced while at Oxford. After his passing, a number of new publications attempted to probe and explain Williams's dynamic, multifaceted, and at times seemingly troubled and complex personality. The effect of the autobiography was seen in the work of Ken Boodhoo, *Eric Williams the Man and the Leader* (1986), and Ramesh Deosaran, *Eric Williams: The Man, His Ideas, and His Politics* (1981). At best, these are perfunctory attempts at psycho-history, with their explanation of Williams rooted primarily in his rather calculated explanation of himself.

Within the last decade, several works devoted to the study of Williams have been published. These include Ken Boodhoo, *The Elusive Eric Williams* (2001); Colin Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (2006); and Selwyn Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man* (2009). The key to these new works are the data available in a series of post-Williams oral interviews conducted among some of his close relatives and associates, and the now accessible Eric Williams Collection at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. Another recent publication is Gerard Besson, *The Cult of the Will* (2010), the result of material that had been accessed from Williams's French Creole family, but also of earlier collaborative work with Bridget Brereton, and some independent work done by Michael Roger Pocock.¹

Of the recent publications, Ryan's is the most detailed and analytical. It makes use of nearly all the previously published materials on Williams, the Eric Williams Memorial Collection, and additional data collected by Ryan through interviews of Williams's relatives and associates. Ryan seems to have set himself the task of providing a logical explanation and evaluation of Williams's every thought and action as historian, politician and prime minister. The result is an 842-plus page *tour de force* recount of Williams's life.

The book is divided into seven sections, incorporating a total of forty-six chapters, each of which explores what Ryan obviously considers to be highly critical developments regarding Williams's life and career, and how his legacy ought to be appreciated. Part 1 explores Williams's early childhood and social background, and his education from primary school level to the acquisition of his PhD at Oxford. Part 2 discusses his entry into the local political arena and his search for the "political kingdom," (from the time of his departure from the Caribbean Commission to the formation of the People's National Movement, and its 1956 victory at the polls). Part 3 explores Williams's early years in office, from the time of his appointment as the country's first chief minister to the collapse of the West Indian Federation. Part 4 analyses Williams's approach to the challenge of securing Trinidad and Tobago's independence, and his handling of the primarily Hindu-based opposition in the run up to the 1961 elections. Part 5 explores his response to the challenge of governing young, independent Trinidad and Tobago, and treating with democracy within the country and the PNM, labour unrest, the Black Power Revolution of 1970, and other forms of social protest prior to the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s. Part 6 continues this analysis through examination of the tactics and policy prescriptions employed by Williams to realise economic development and social stability in the aftermath of the 1970 disturbances. The concluding section attempts to bring together previous considerations and to examine the legacy of Williams from a balanced perspective.

By Ryan's own reckoning, the book had been in preparation over a long period of time. The numerous, lengthy quotations and the meticulous attempts to analyse them suggest that the author has an eye for details. Ryan entered into a rather wide-ranging discourse and is a rich data-source provider to all who would read the book. He makes available, where necessary, useful injections of comparative global politics to explain related developments in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. The book will prove immensely informative to both students and scholars interested not only in Eric Williams, but also the history of Trinidad and Tobago and the region. Given that the volume provides accounts and explanations of so much that was previously unknown about the domestic scene, it might very well be regarded as a welcome response to the classic request for "everything [one] wanted to know but was afraid to ask."

In light of its tremendously informative nature, the book has been deservedly lauded by some noted Caribbean authorities. But there are some caveats regarding Ryan's methodology, in particular, the applicability of evidence and the formulation of conclusions from the mass of sometimes conflicting data incorporated in the text. Some of Ryan's oral sources are anonymous, and the reader is expected to trust him on their authenticity, what the interviewees say and his interpretation of the data they provide. In the introduction, Ryan makes out a case for the validation of his approach, and the authenticity of his contribution, based on his expertise in Trinidad and Tobago's political history, and his familiarity with Eric Williams with whom he associated for many years. But the fact that Ryan found it necessary at the inception to devote so much effort to the development of a "sales pitch," alerts the reader to the possibility that some of the ideas brought forward in the book may be considered questionable.

In the introduction, Ryan wrote:

"In this study of Williams, I have tried to follow Plutarch in his search for balance. I have focused on the good, the bad, and the very bad and found that Williams was not always the hero that the constructed myth made him out to be. Neither was he the wicked genius that some saw and still see him to be. The truth about him lies in the middle as the reader will discover. Williams was capable of great human warmth as well as rudeness and insensitivity. That, and much else, remains puzzling."²

Appearing where it does within the text, this is undoubtedly the conclusion of Ryan following his pursuit of rational explanations and evaluation of Williams's every word and action. Ryan had placed Williams on trial and in the fullest glare of both historical and historiographical scrutiny. Throughout, Williams is on the defensive, and is the subject of Ryan's commentary on commentary. Further, he is measured, as it were, against a Williams that Ryan and many detractors wanted him to be. Ryan makes a good go at this methodology, by examining every controversial issue related to Williams's career. But he takes his cue primarily from the concerns of Williams's critics, and almost every move that does not meet their approval is used as a basis for projecting Williams as "psychologically damaged."

For Ryan, Williams is essentially Prometheus, is almost too often the "nationalist scholar" rather than scholar's scholar, here and there a "Sawdust Caesar," the cause of the break-up of the Federation, the ultimate cause of the failure of "black entrepreneurship," and the originator of Laventille. Further, Williams's supporters are his "sycophants" and "mandarins," and he is to be blamed for the fact that they venerated him. Far from being disingenuous, Ryan's writing on Williams is less derisive than it is uncompromising, although perhaps it dwells more on "the bad and very bad" than "the good." In the concluding section, for example, Ryan sets out to make that critical contrast between the Williams so many knew and venerated and the real Williams. Williams is projected as a charismatic, domineering leader of often inexplicable behaviour, given to paranoia and moodiness. Specifically, he is to be blamed for the "sleeze and immorality" which he allowed to go unchecked in the interest of party cohesion and solidarity, and for his dominance over the party and local politics. Such negative developments occurred under Williams, notwithstanding the "liberalism of his intellectual conviction" which he often "compromised... in the context of practical political action."³ To quote Ryan, "As a political manager Williams was a failure."⁴ It is remarkable, therefore, that given all this, Ryan's parting words are that "On balance, however, his [Williams's] performance was worthy of historical applause."⁵ The strength of the statement comes from the many positives regarding Williams's

contributions and achievements which were highlighted within the text, but were not brought out in the concluding chapter, incidentally the weakest chapter, because of its focus on the negative.

The dilemma of this work is that while it attempts to provide rational, balanced and opposing views on the personality of Williams, it asks the reader at times to identify with positions taken by Ryan which are not sufficiently borne out by the evidence presented. Ryan displays a tendency to incorporate many opposing views of Williams, and this sometimes discounts the validity of his own conclusions. In that sense, the strength of the volume seems to be its weakness, in terms of its deviation from what might have been intended by the author. For, if it is that Ryan sets out to make a distinction between the “myth” and the “man” that was Williams, that myth is hardly ever clearly defined. It appears to be a composite myth, many aspects of which are not clear.

In his determination to prove that his judgment is balanced, Ryan often provides many alternative perceptions that leave the way open for the reader to form the opinion that at times he is forcing conclusions and correlations not necessarily supported by the data. Two examples are:

- (1) Ryan’s treatment of the notion that Williams suffered from bi-polar depression and
- (2) Ryan’s conjecture that Williams might have staged a “constructive suicide.”

The strongest evidence put forward by Ryan for his bi-polar depression “hypothesis” comes from two individuals whom Ryan claims to be diseased at the time of writings, whom he chose not to identify, and whose comments about William’s psychological condition might have been speculative. Chapter 43, “The Last Days of Eric Williams,” is highly speculative. Here, Ryan is less than convincing in his attempt to link a series of circumstances to suggest that an ailing Williams planned his death, refused to seek medical treatment, and allowed himself to die believing that it was best for the PNM and the country. Ryan’s approach on these issues is not out of sync with that adopted in other parts of the text where gossip and mere suppositions are apparently elevated to the status of fact or accorded undue significance as evidence.

But then again, Ryan also sees in the life of Williams so much that is reflected in heroes of the Greek tragedy; so much so, that after searching for suitable theoretical bases from which to explain Williams’s behavior, Ryan allows these to be discounted by a lingering recourse to Greek tragedy which is essentially grounded in myth. What is to prevent the reader from concluding that the historical imagination can and does take flight, leaving the historian to believe and pursue his own myth? Even if one were inclined to side with Ryan on a number of issues, certain considerations caution restraint. He himself recognized that some of the fiercest criticisms of Williams came from those with whom the latter eventually ran into conflict, discarded or opposed. One gets the impression that the credibility or admissibility of their criticisms was never discounted in Ryan’s sub-consciousness. Meanwhile, Williams is never exculpated. His every move is measured against a range of normative behaviors best known to Ryan, and which, to the present reviewer, is the result of hindsight. This is the great advantage we as historians hold over the characters we analyse and which, rightly or wrongly, allows us to act as hanging judges.

On balance, Ryan leaves us uncertain about the differences between the myth and the man. But in the end, the work renders us curious and prompts in us the desire to know more. It is

still by far the most probing and thought-provoking text on Williams to date. Ryan's own confusion about Williams merely points to the need for further research on this important Caribbean personality.

¹ See Gerard Besson and Bridget Brereton. *The Book of Trinidad*. Port of Spain: Paria Publishing Company Ltd, 1986; and Michael Rogers Pocock, *Out of the Shadows of the Past: the Story of the 'Great House' of Champs Elysees, Maraval, and an account of the lives and times of the families who lived in it, 1780-1932*. East Sussex: Michael Rogers Pocock, 2002.

² Ryan, Selwyn, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man*. The University of the West Indies Press: Mona, Kingston, 2009. 6.

³ Ryan Eric Williams: *The Myth and the Man*, 656.

⁴ Ryan Eric Williams: *The Myth and the Man*, 785.

⁵ Ryan Eric Williams: *The Myth and the Man*, 786.