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Commonwealth history from below?:

Caribbean national, federal and Pan-African renegotiations of the Empire project, c. 1880-1950

'We are your equals then, by natural right, and if nature pleases itself to diversify colours within the human race, it is not a crime to be born black or an advantage to be born white...Have you forgotten that you have formally vowed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which says that men are born free, equal in their rights...?'

Biassau, Jean-Francois and Toussaint L'Ouverture, 'Letter to the General Assembly' (1792)

What might a Commonwealth 'history from below' look like? On what terms did subordinate stakeholders, those on the underside of that system of economic, political and cultural power we call 'empire', invest in ideas of Britain, the Empire, and the Commonwealth? This is the question which Saul Dubow posed in 2009 for South Africa, pointing, for example, to Selope Thema insisting in 1922 on claiming 'our rights of citizenship first as the aboriginals of this country, and second as British subjects.'¹ Even earlier, Gandhi wrote at the time of the Boer War on behalf of Indian immigrants in South Africa, 'Though in Natal' . . . Yet we are British subjects'.² What did such a claim of Britishness, or membership in the Empire or Commonwealth, mean for those racialised as black or brown?

Some of the new work on 'loyalism' at the end of empire helps.³ But 'loyalism' can be a distorting lens with which to begin enquiry. It risks reducing very complex negotiations and political and ideological positioning to collaboration or resistance. There is a risk too, as in the work of Cooper and Burbank, and in Darwin's *Unfinished Empire* (2013), of confusing what were purely tactical investments in British or French imperial categories and imaginaries, forced by the despotic constraints of these regimes, with strategic affinities.⁴ For this reason I suggest, per my debate with Cooper in

¹ Saul Dubow, 'How British was the British World? The Case of South Africa', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2009, 37:1, 1-27, see p. 13 fn. 62.

² Goolam Vahed, 'African Gandhi': The South African War and the Limits of Imperial Identity', *Historia*, May 2000, 45 (1): 201-219.

³ Daniel Branch, 'The enemy within: Loyalists and the war against Mau Mau in Kenya', *Journal of African History*, 2007, 48: 291-315; David M. Anderson & Daniel Branch (2017) *Allies at the End of Empire—Loyalists, Nationalists and the Cold War, 1945–76*, *The International History Review*, 39:1, 1-13.

⁴ Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (London, 2010);

2017, that we see the political postures of those in a subordinate colonial location in terms of what Glissant called 'forced poetics', that is to say as occurring in an illocutionary context in which meaning was constrained not, per Quentin Skinner, by past usages, but rather by the pressures of present power on the speech act.⁵ This problem of the tug of interests operating on any system of political signifiers which sits between interlocutors who meet on unequal terms has vital methodological importance in global intellectual history. By its lights we might ask, for example, if Christopher Bayly miscalibrates in part what Indian 'Liberalism' meant on its inner surfaces by not taking stock of the context of violence and constraint within which Indians contracted with Western ideas?⁶ British imperial power was not just a political and economic system, it was also a social and cultural order, to which white supremacy and the cognitive centrality of Europe were central. Those on the underside of were compelled to negotiate their interests, as best they could, in its ideological currencies.

This essay explores how Caribbean intellectuals and political actors, operating in a field of power dominated by white British and Dominion actors, used the ideas of the British Empire and the (British) Commonwealth in service to their own national and transnational ends. It pays particular attention to Pan-African and Pan-Caribbean projects which sought to negotiate themselves against and with the Imperial and Commonwealth ideas and their political logics. The significance of recovering these discursive interventions goes beyond contributing to either the relatively narrow domains of Caribbean or Commonwealth history, or the methods of global political thought. In July 1940, after the fall of France, the New York-based West Indies National Emergency Committee presented its *Declaration of the Rights of Caribbean Peoples to Self-Determination and Self-Government* to the Pan-

Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation: Rethinking France and Africa* (Princeton, 2014); John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London, 2013).

⁵ Richard Drayton, 'Federal Utopias and the Realities of Imperial Power', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2017, 37 (2): 401–406. The classic statement of the Skinner view is Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969), pp. 3–53.

⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2011).

American Foreign Ministers' Conference in Havana.⁷ It asserted, in a neat redeployment of the Monroe Doctrine and contemporary liberal thought, that the future of the entire Caribbean was to be sovereign and united.⁸ But beyond this, as Adom Getachew argues, it is a pioneering document in international political thought since, before the Atlantic Charter, it presented the 'anti-colonial refashioning of self-determination as a human right'.⁹ The implications of this intervention run deep into the Twentieth Century, if we accept Steven Jensen's proposition that Commonwealth Caribbean figures played a central role in the making of international human rights doctrine over the long 1960s.¹⁰ But the roots of all this lay in how Caribbean intellectuals and political figures in the early twentieth century had demanded the renegotiation of the idea of the British Commonwealth from below in the interests of their region and of the African diaspora, and towards a post-racist cosmopolitan order.

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It is this tradition of colonial and anti-colonial transactions with ideas of Britain and the Commonwealth which this essay seeks to excavate. It turns first to the key crisis in the First World War where the idea of the British Commonwealth became a formal international political project. Then, we step backwards to look at the Victorian and Edwardian Caribbean negotiations with the Imperial Federation project which underpinned the later Commonwealth. Finally it follows the arc of Caribbean negotiations of their own political projects through and against the Commonwealth idea into the emergence of modern national politics. There are good reasons why, pace Philip Murphy, the Commonwealth retains a powerful appeal for the Global South: long before political independence, it

⁷ I am grateful to Richard Hart (1917-2013) for a gift of his copy of this rare pamphlet which he had received from Wilfred Domingo, one of its authors.

⁸ For the tradition of which this was a key initiating document see Eric D. Duke's account of how the Caribbean diaspora in the United States sought to shape West Indian politics in *Building a Nation: Caribbean Federation in the Black Diaspora* (Gainesville, 2015).

⁹ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019), p. 87.

¹⁰ Steven L. R. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge, 2016).

was an object and imaginary through which colonial people sought to secure their national and international ends.

Marryshow vs. Smuts

All imperial utopian projects contain within them ideas of the cosmopolitan distorted by their capture by the empire's elites. The British Commonwealth as an idea had its roots in the late Victorian diasporic ideas of Britishness, for which the idea of a global colour line was central.¹¹ It acquired real political momentum during the First World War, with its meaning defined in a series of speeches given by Jan Smuts in 1917 when he came to attend the Imperial War Conference.¹² In his May 1915 speech to the House of Lords, Smuts argued that the British Empire was much more than a state, it was, at least with respect to the Dominions, a 'community of nations, which I prefer to call the British Commonwealth of nations'.¹³ Its partner, 'The Future of South and Central Africa', sometimes called the 'White Man's Duty', Smuts gave at the Savoy to a dinner in his honour one week later on May 22. Here, he projected how men of all European nations could collaborate in colonial expansion in Africa, so long as they avoided miscegenation with Black Africans who, showing an incapacity for enduring civilisation, would be kept in their place. 'With us there are certain axioms now in regard to the relations of white and black', he said, 'the principal one is 'no intermixture of blood between the two colours'.¹⁴

Smuts's vision of the British Commonwealth was of a white supremacist condominium based on the

¹¹ M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, 2008).

¹² J. C. Smuts, *War-Time Speeches: A Compilation of Public Utterances in Great Britain* (New York, 1917).

¹³ "The British Commonwealth of Nations", in Smuts, *War-Time Speeches*, p. 27.

¹⁴ "The Future of South and Central Africa" in Smuts, *War-Time Speeches*, p. 77. See also 'Problems in South Africa: Address by General Smuts', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1917, 16 (64), 279-80.

interlocking sovereignties of Britain (with its dependent empire) and settler colonial Dominions (each with their own sub-imperial zones). As Bill Schwarz shows, he was perhaps the key theorist of a 'white man's world'.¹⁵ Smuts offered a programme for a twentieth-century international order based on racial domination, both in his 1917 speech on a future League of Nations and in his 1918 essay which played an important role at Versailles.¹⁶ In 1945, W. E. B. DuBois reminded the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester that the counterpoint to their collective project was Smuts's 'Pan-Africanism' of 'white investors and exploiters'.¹⁷ Even in 1925, DuBois had identified Smuts as the key protagonist of a racist internationalism, 'He is fighting for peace and goodwill in a white Europe which can by union present a united front to the yellow, brown and black worlds'.¹⁸ Marcus Garvey in his opening address to the International Convention of Negroes of the World in New York in 1921 declared 'Smuts seems to be the spokesman of the White race ... Smuts represents the idea that Negroes have no rights anywhere'.¹⁹

But long before this, even in June 1917 itself, only weeks after the Savoy Speech, in the tiny Crown Colony of Grenada, the then 30 year old Theophilus Albert Marryshow had offered a riposte to Smuts. Marryshow published "Cycles of Civilisation- Insights on the Rise and Fall of Europe, Asia and Africa" in the newspaper *The West Indian* which he had founded two years before in 1915. *Cycles of*

¹⁵ Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011). There are, of course, abundant grounds for prosecution to be found in Smuts's role in the origins of Apartheid in the domestic politics of South Africa, in particular his role in the origins of a system of racist legislation, including the Mines and Works Act of 1911, the Native Land Act of 1913, the Native Affairs Act of 1920 and the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, see H. J. Simons and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 174, 251, 351.

¹⁶ "A League of Nations" Smuts, *War-Time Speeches*, pp. 49-62 and *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion* (London, 1918). For near contemporary critical comment see Rayford W. Logan, 'Operation of the Mandate System in Africa', *The Journal of Negro History*, 1928, 13 (4), pp. 423-477. The best contextualisation of these interventions is Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (London, 1917).

¹⁷ George Padmore, *Colonial and Coloured Unity, a Programme of Action: History of the Pan-African Congress* (Manchester, 1945), p. 26. See also Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011), p. 306.

¹⁸ Quoted by Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, p. 306.

¹⁹ Quoted in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, Volume IX (Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 129-130.

Civilisation spoke, in part, the new language of Pan-African vindication, describing Africa's royal age when 'the inhabitants of England were . . . unmitigated savages, who fed on the barks and roots of trees, and were scantily clothed with the skins of animals', noting that 'Greece drew milk and nurture from the Egyptian breast through which she became the towering force of her day', and announcing the promise of Africa's return.²⁰ It also expressed how colonials were tangling the claims of the Sermon on the Mount with more novel egalitarian ideas of common rights in a prophecy that while 'the applause and cheers which greeted certain parts of the speech of General Smuts may drown the small voice of human rights, . . . a giant spirit of Democracy and Socialism is coming to do God's work of a levelling up and a levelling down'.²¹ But beyond this it was an acute analysis of the implications of Smuts's vision of the (White) British Commonwealth of Nations, a piratical take-over of the imperial project.

Marryshow's dissent from Smuts rested on an assertion of a kind of British imperial patriotism. Smuts, he argued, had 'outlined a program for the suppression of Africans in the interest of white members of the society' which was 'the reverse of what [England's] thinkers lived for. . .the truths for which England stood in the past... that built up her greatness and power, and made her the darling of Providence and the salt of the nations of the earth'.²² He noted that at that moment in Egypt, 'our brothers from the West Indies are encamped today as soldiers of the British Empire'. The courage and sacrifice of the Negro subjects of His Majesty should be rewarded with full membership in all rights of citizenship. He offered a prophecy and a warning:

The rocks ahead on which the waves of the British Empire are heading to spend themselves are the Rocks of Race. The irresistible rise of the darker races shall be accomplished, even on the heads of

²⁰ T. A. Marryshow, *Cycles of Civilisation: A Reply to General Smuts* (St George's, Grenada, 1917), page number references are to the 1973 edition by Pathway Publishers (New York), here page 14. The text is also available in abbreviated form at <https://Marryshow.name/2017/05/10/cycles-of-civilization>.

²¹ Marryshow, *Cycles*, 14.

²² Marryshow, *Cycles*, 19.

the proud Anglo-Saxon if they do not make room.²³

This rise was to occur in one form in the British West Indies becoming a united and self-governing dominion. Sovereignty within the empire was the goal, on the models of the Canadian Confederation of 1867, the Australian Federation of 1900 and the Union of South Africa of 1910.

But Marryshow's British Imperial patriotism was joined to arguments that conjectured subversive post-British futures. He looked East for a model: 'People of African descent must think nationally like Japan, build ships, found professorial chairs, encourage inventions. . . We must have a fatherland, at next best thing have a great dream of one'. He then offers a more dangerous proposition: 'Sons of New Ethiopia scattered all over the world, should determine that there shall be new systems of the distribution of opportunities, privileges and rights, so that Africa shall rid herself of many of the murderous highwaymen of Europe'. Given that many of these highwaymen carried the Union Jack this was imperial patriotism of a very special kind: the liberal charisma of the imperial project was being deployed against its contemporary realities. He also looked West, urging in Pan-American terms that prefigured the 1940 'Declaration of Rights of the Caribbean Peoples', that around the canal in Panama a new hemispheric civilisation was coming into flower.

'Cycles of Civilization' did not come out of a vacuum. Across the Caribbean, from the very beginning of the nineteenth century, people of colour had sought to secure their interests using the intellectual and political currencies of the colonizing power

²³ Marryshow, *Cycles*,

Britishness, Imperial Federation and Caribbean projects of citizenship and sovereignty, c. 1800-1919

West Indians had long and intimate knowledge of the racial contradictions of democracy and empire. From the House of Assembly in Barbados in 1637, English West Indian colonies had legislatures. But this space of liberty was limited to white men who were communicant Anglicans. Among the excluded were an increasingly large, educated and propertied group of free people of colour. The tension was sharpened by Britain's acquisition after 1763 of an increasing number of islands settled by the French, in which the *gens de couleur* were a large and sophisticated land-owning community. During the French Revolutionary crisis in the Caribbean, this minority took up arms in Grenada, Marryshow's island, with Julian Fedon leading a slave uprising in 1795-6 which threatened to make another St Domingue.²⁴ Elsewhere in the British West Indies, this group began to agitate in the early nineteenth century, demanding the civic rights which their free status, wealth, cultivation and service in the militia justified. Central to this was claiming the British Empire as their own: that unalienable rights derived from their membership as British subjects in an empire of liberties and rights.²⁵

After the end of Slavery (1834-8), an emerging brown and black middle class pressed as British subjects and citizens for their right to sit in the legislature, serve on vestries, and to participate fully in

²⁴ Edward L. Cox, "Fedon's Rebellion 1795-96: Causes and Consequences", *The Journal of Negro History* 67 (1): 7-19; Kit Candlin, 'What Became of the Fedon Rebellion?', in *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795-1815* (London, 2012), 1-23 and 'The role of the enslaved in the 'Fedon Rebellion' of 1795', *Slavery & Abolition*, 2018, 39:4, 685-707; and Tessa Murphy, 'A Reassertion of Rights: Fedon's Rebellion, Grenada, 1795-96', *La Révolution française*, 14, 2018, URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/2017> ; DOI : 10.4000/lrf.2017.

²⁵ Jerome K. Handler *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore, 1974); Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Coloureds in 1792-1865* (New Haven, 1981); Carl Campbell, 'The rise of a free coloured plantocracy in Trinidad 1783-1813', *Boletín De Estudios Latinoamericanos Y Del Caribe*, 1980, (29), 33-53; Edward L. Cox, *Free Coloureds in the Slave Societies of St. Kitts and Grenada, 1763-1833* (Knoxville, 1984); Dayo Mitchell, 'The Ambiguous Distinctions of Descent: Free People of Color and the Construction of Citizenship in Trinidad and Dominica, 1800-1838', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2004; Christer Petley. (2005). 'Legitimacy' and Social Boundaries: Free People of Colour and the Social Order in Jamaican Slave Society', *Social History*, 30(4), 481-498; Melanie Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge, 2008).

public life.²⁶ This class was keenly conscious of what was published and discussed in Britain, what was happening around the world. They were painfully aware that while the trend in their Victorian moment was for the expansion of the franchise in Britain and self-government in white settler colonies, the tendency in British territories with a non-white majority was a shift in exactly the reverse direction, towards the Crown Colony, where the Governor-General ruled as an absolute despot, enlightened or otherwise. Trinidad was from its origins was a Crown Colony, Jamaica in 1865 after the Morant Bay Rebellion lost its representative institutions. The partner to this was the growth of racism and a contempt for the black West Indian in the works of leading Victorian intellectuals such as Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley and J. H. Froude.²⁷

The West Indians defended their political and cultural interests on the platform and pulpit, in print, and through local and transnational organisation. The most striking example was J. J. Thomas (1841-1889), perhaps the most brilliant nineteenth-century Anglo-Caribbean intellectual, who published both *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* (1869), a pioneering study in creole linguistics which sought to dignify how English and French were spoken in the Caribbean, and *Froudacity* (1889), a rebuttal of a book in which Froude had argued that non-whites could not be trusted with self-government.²⁸ Thomas's contemporary Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), in his circuits of movement between the Caribbean, the United States, Liberia and Sierra Leone responded to the crisis with his globally-influential vision of a Pan-African national awakening.²⁹ Blyden's Pan-Africanism was cleverly negotiated in the age of the Pax Britannica with an appeal to the British Empire as animated by 'high moral purpose' and a 'strong sense of right and justice'.³⁰ The Trinidadian

²⁶ Richard Drayton, 'Race, Culture and Class: European hegemony and global class formation, c. 1800-1950' in Jurgen Osterhammel, Christof Dejung, and David Motadel, eds. *The Global Bourgeoisie* (Princeton 2019).

²⁷ Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies* (London, 1966).

²⁸ On Thomas and his milieu see Faith Smith, *Creole Recitations: John Jacob Thomas and Colonial Formation in the Late Nineteenth-century Caribbean* (Charlottesville, 2000).

²⁹ Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (New York, 1967).

³⁰ Edward Blyden, *West Africa Before Europe, and other addresses delivered in England in 1901 and 1903* (London,

Henry Sylvester Williams (1869-1911), who in 1900 had organised the first Pan-African Congress in London, similarly entangled Pan-Africanism with a reach towards that part of the African diaspora within the British Empire.³¹

Viewed from London or Montreal, the West Indies, with its non-white majorities, was, at best, an ambivalent part of the project to transform the British Empire into a voluntary union of sovereign nations.³² Yet, for West Indians the democratic implications of the Imperial Federation Project appeared to be valuable for their own struggles for local democratic participation and 'home rule'. The road to Marryshow in 1917 came directly from this turn. In 1876, against the vehement protest of Dr William Wells, the Speaker of the House of Assembly, and its creole middle class, Grenada became a Crown Colony. From 1883, William Galwey Donovan, the close protege of Wells, a man of mixed Irish and African ancestry, led a campaign for the restoration of the sovereignty of the legislature based on an extended franchise.³³ Donovan's democratic case turned on an argument that West Indians were fully English, and should share in English rights, and those extended to Canada, New Zealand and Australia:

Our tongue is the English tongue; the traditions of England are our traditions. In every- thing but colour we are Englishmen. If there is one thing more than any other which British rule has fostered in us it is the love of self-government.³⁴

After a stint in jail for the criminal libel of a Governor, Donovan emerged radicalized, and by the 1890s

1905), p. 99.

³¹ Marika Sherwood, *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (London, 2010).

³² On the origins and development of the Imperial Federation Movement see Ged Martin, 'Empire Federalism and Imperial Parliamentary Union, 1820–1870', *The Historical Journal*, 1973, 16(1), 65-92; Michael Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism* (Madison, 1995), pp. 23-110; Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton, 2009); Peter Price, 'Steppingstones to Imperial Unity? The British West Indies in the Late-Victorian Imperial Federation Movement', *Canadian Journal of History*, 2017, 52, 240-263.

³³ Edward L. Cox, 'William Galwey Donovan and the Struggle for Political Change in Grenada, 1883-1920', *Small Axe* (2007) 11 (1): 17-38.

³⁴ Quoted in Cox, 'William Galwey Donovan', 22.

had become increasingly Pan-African in his world view while at the same time seeking to insert the West Indies in the liberal turn towards Imperial Federation. In 1893, Donovan wrote a powerful memorandum to Lord Ripon at the Colonial Office, demanding that the West Indies benefit as the White Dominions had from self-government:

Socialism, communism, and other doctrines of government—the outcome of tyranny and oppression are in the air. They are daily preached throughout the world. Does your lordship believe that the West Indies are cut off from the rest of mankind, and, therefore cannot be affected by any movement of this nature taking place outside their limits?³⁵

In 1901, Donovan founded a newspaper in Grenada called *The Federalist and Grenada People*, which explicitly connected the local campaign for democracy with the idea of a sovereign and united West Indies as part of an Imperial Federation. Two years later, at the age of 16, Marryshow came to work as an office boy at *The Federalist*. Marryshow's founding of *The West Indian* in 1915 was in direct homage to Donovan's *Federalist*. As Cox notes, if we call Marryshow 'the Father of the West Indies Federation' of 1958-62, then we should acknowledge Donovan as its ancestor. Marryshow, like his mentor, would twine together a campaign against the Crown Colony system, a Caribbean federal project, with Pan-Africanism and a nuanced kind of imperial patriotism.³⁶

New threats made a Caribbean negotiation of Imperial Federation more urgent. For the elite Imperial Federation project c. 1900 seemed to promise unification of the West Indies on the Crown Colony model without democratic constitutions and increased local autonomy. In 1900, for example, Joseph Chamberlain further altered the 1865 Crown Colony Jamaican constitution to give a strong majority in the Assembly to the members nominated by the Governor. In 1902, Norman Lamont, the

³⁵ Donovan to Marquis of Ripon, 9 August 1893, TNA: C.O. 321/146.

³⁶ Patrick Emmanuel, *Crown Colony Politics in Grenada, 1917-1951* (Bridgetown, 1978).

Scottish Liberal MP whose family owned sugar plantations in Trinidad, called in a speech at Rothesay for the federation of the West Indian territories into 'one great colony with a Cromer or a Curzon at the head of it, advised by a council of the best men we can send out'.³⁷ In 1907, Lamont expanded his vision in a long article in the *Contemporary Review* in which he projected the future Federation of the West Indies would be ruled by a Governor-General and Council sent out from Britain, and a federal legislature exclusively of nominated members.³⁸ This project acquired its formal statement in *A United West Indies*, published by Gideon Murray, the Administrator of St Vincent, in 1912. Murray's Imperial Federation program for the West Indies was silent on the question of representative government, except to say that in the long term perhaps, the future union might evolve towards the Barbados model (although to begin with that island would be subordinated to what essentially would be a grand kind of Crown Colony).³⁹ A convergent threat from the drive for Imperial Federation from above was the rise of a Canadian sub-imperial project to annex the British West Indies, making them all quasi Crown Colonies of Canada, with laws preventing the wrong West Indians from migrating northwards.⁴⁰ Black and brown West Indians were well aware both of Canadian racism, and of the ominous similarities between the Canadian push to the south and the South African drive northwards.

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On the eve of the First World War, West Indians response to the Imperial Federation question was quickened also by the expansion of the United States in the Caribbean during and after 1898. They had a direct confrontation with the Pax Americana in Panama, Central America and Cuba, to which large numbers of West Indians went to dig the canal, build railways, and work on banana and sugar

³⁷ Norman Lamont, *Problems of the Antilles. A collection of Speeches and Writings on West Indian Questions* (Glasgow, 1912), 42.

³⁸ Norman Lamont, 'The West Indian Problem : A Reply to Imperialist', *Contemporary Review*, v. 92, November, 1907, 672-8.

³⁹ C. Gideon Murray, *A United West Indies* (London, 1912), 108.

⁴⁰ See Paula Pears Hastings, 'Dreams of a Tropical Canada: Race, Nation, and Canadian Aspirations in the Caribbean Basin, 1883-1919', Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Duke University, 2010.

plantations. In Panama, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, people from Jamaica met their equivalents from Barbados and Antigua, and both discovered themselves as West Indians and discovered themselves as 'Negroes' facing a common danger. Louis S. Meikle, a Jamaican-born physician in Panama who had been trained at Howard, 'Negro Oxford', in the United States, described the predicament in an influential book *Confederation of the British West Indies vs. Annexation to the United States of America* (1912). Meikle argued that the fate of all European colonies in the hemisphere was to fall ultimately under the American domination, which would mean the imposition of the norms of Jim Crow, disenfranchisement and lynching on the West Indies.⁴¹ Canada offered no safety, 'the white people of the Dominion are no less drastic on the race problem than their American neighbours', but it did offer a model.⁴² Unification of all the British possessions in the Caribbean area into a West Indian dominion based on a 'government by the people for the people' was the only alternative to the subordination of the islands to an American or Canadian racial despotism. Meikle claimed the Imperial Federation project in the name of West Indian self-determination and of the prospect of dignity for those born with dark skins:

The great desire for the Confederation of the British West Indian Possessions is that we want to be a part of the world-wide Empire. We want to be looked upon as part and parcel of the British nation. . . and to preserve the West Indies for the West Indians.⁴³

Marcus Garvey published 'The British West Indies in the Mirror of Civilization: History Making by Colonial Negroes' in 1913 in London. Garvey prophesied that a West Indian federation within the British Empire based on popular sovereignty was inevitable when 'democracy is spreading itself over the British Empire, and the peoples under the rule of the Union Jack are freeing themselves from

⁴¹ Sean X. Goudie, 'Racial Capitalism and American Literary Studies in the Web of Life', *American Literary History*, 2017, 29 (3), 546–564, see 562.

⁴² Louis Meikle, *Confederation of the British West Indies vs. Annexation to the United States of America* (London, 1912), 59–60.

⁴³ Meikle, *Confederation*, 6.

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hereditary lordship and an unjust bureaucracy'.⁴⁴ In 1914, in an article in the Jamaican press he argued, praising Meikle, that only through a 'West Indian Federation' would West Indians get 'proper representation within the empire'.⁴⁵ There was a Blydenesque twist to his imperial federationism. He argued these united West Indians had their own manifest destiny, as 'the instruments of uniting a scattered race who... will found an Empire on which the sun will shine as ceaselessly as it shines on the Empire of the North'.⁴⁶ Imperial Federation would be a vehicle for a Pan-African state-building project under West Indian leadership. In 1914, he began his career as an organizer founding the founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities Imperial League, declaring that one of its purposes was 'to strengthen the imperialism of independent African states'.⁴⁷ Smuts in 1914 may have been dreaming Rhodes's dream of a white African empire extending northwards to the Kenyan highlands, but on the other side of the Atlantic [there](#) were black men imagining its mirror image.

The West Indian response to the British imperial project took divergent paths under the radicalising impact of the First World War. Garvey, who moved to the United States in 1916, would cut out the British middle man, and essay a mimetic Pan-African empire project. He argued that the freedom of future generations of the Negro race 'can only be gained after we have established an imperial power to command the respect of nations and races'.⁴⁸ By 1919, Garvey identified explicitly with all the anti-colonial movements which had germinated in the British Empire during the War, declaring that 'Freedom of will and action should be the prerogative of every race and nation, and as the Irish is striking forward with his indomitable will, as also the Hindu and Egyptian, so must the

⁴⁴ Marcus Garvey, 'The British West Indies in the Mirror of Civilization', in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, I (Los Angeles, 1983), 27-33.

⁴⁵ Marcus Garvey, 'West Indian Federation', in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, I, 50-51.

⁴⁶ The British West Indies in the Mirror of History', 32-33.

⁴⁷ Robert A. Hill, 'Introduction', *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, I, lix-lx.

⁴⁸ 1919 speech, quoted in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, II, 375.

Negro'.⁴⁹ In 1922 he marked his rupture with the view of Blyden's generation, writing that 'The Negro in the British Empire will never reach the height of his constitutional rights'.⁵⁰ Within the Caribbean, however, Meikle's vision of emancipation within the imperial project was shared by many. By 1919, new forms of trade union, democratic and national politics were in motion. Its leaders, such as Marryshow in Grenada and Captain Alfred Cipriani in Trinidad, would seek their political ends in and through, but also against, Smuts's idea of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

We may make a portable theoretical tool from examining this system of Caribbean political interventions. 'Africa for the Africans at Home and Abroad', Garvey's drive, and 'The West Indies Must Be West Indian' - the slogan which Marryshow put in 1915 on the masthead of *The West Indian* newspaper - should be seen as examples of counter-imperialisms. By 'imperialism' we mean both the internal project of the unification of a polity and an expansive project directed outwards. 'Sub-imperialism' describes how peripheral actors organise their own local projects of expansion.⁵¹ By counter-imperialism I refer to the phenomenon of a subordinate group in an imperial system imagining or organising a similar national and/or international project. West Indian nationalism and Pan-Africanism, were two currents of counter-imperialism which had gestated in Britain's High Imperial moment. They took distinct but entangled paths through the rest of the twentieth century.

Federation in the Commonwealth and West Indian nationalism and internationalism, c. 1919-1950

The First World War radicalised West Indians, as it had the Irish, Egyptians, Indians and Australians.

⁴⁹ *Negro World*, 23 August 1919.

⁵⁰ *Principles of the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (New York, 1922).

⁵¹ I would note that I am uncomfortable with Tom Metcalf's description of the Indian diaspora in East Africa as a species of 'sub-imperialism', which seems to muddle a distinction between the self-conscious White settler colonial expansive projects in Africa and what was a diffused effect of social and economic history, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley, 2007).

The soldiers of the British West Indian Regiment, who had volunteered as British patriots, experienced systematic racial discrimination. One group described landing in Egypt and while marching singing 'Rule Britannia!', found their chorus of 'Britons, never never never shall be slaves' greeted with jeering from white soldiers: 'Who gave you niggers authority to sing that?'⁵² This reached a key climax at Taranto in Italy in December 1918, when a South African Brigadier-General, in the spirit of Smuts's call in 1917 to disarm black men, assigned the veterans of the Palestine campaign to the humiliations of cleaning white soldiers' latrines, declaring that 'the men are only niggers'.⁵³ A mutiny ensued, in the wake of which a group of sergeants formed the Caribbean League, pledging to a common political cause after demobilization, one of their number declaring the black man 'should have freedom and govern himself in the West Indies'. When the soldiers returned home, they played a key role a wave of trade union and political militancy. In British Guiana, for example, 1919 saw the emergence of the British Guiana Labour Union, the first trade union in a dependent colony. Captain Cipriani, a white Trinidadian who had fought for his men at Taranto, led the Trinidad Working Men's Association, which later transmuted into the Trinidad Labour Party.

A wave of strikes and riots spread across the region in 1919 and 1920, leading to the passing of Sedition Laws which prohibited the importation of a variety of newspapers, in particular Garvey's *Negro World*. But Garveyite and socialist ideas trickled through nonetheless, not least into Smuts's South Africa where they rapidly spread in town and countryside.⁵⁴ In the security panic, the British also allowed regulated forms of trade unions and reached out to moderate figures, such as Marryshow.

⁵² W. Elkins, 'A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy' *Science & Society*, 34(1), 99-103, see p. 99.

⁵³ A. A. Cipriani, *Twenty-Five Years After: The British West Indies Regiment in the Great War* (Port of Spain, 1940), p. 62. On Taranto, see Elkins 'A Source'.

⁵⁴ R. T. Vinson, *The Americans are Coming: Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens, 2012), 63-102.

and Cipriani. The West Indians in turn, underlined their identity as British subjects, at the same time as they pressed for the West Indies to take its full place in the emerging British Commonwealth of Nations. Marryshow, for example, described the people of the West Indies as 'British to the core'.⁵⁵ He travelled to London and presented petitions from around the region demanding representative government and federation to Whitehall. Marryshow's agitation led directly to the dispatch of the Wood Commission. At the same moment, business interests in the West Indies and London began, for their own reasons, to take up Murray's project of 'a united West Indies'.⁵⁶ The new West Indian worker and national movements seized the day, in the spirit of Donovan and Meikle.

In January 1926, the British Guiana and West Indies Labour Conference met for the first time. Cipriani led a number of speakers in championing the idea that a federation of the West Indies would be the vehicle for democracy and local autonomy, arguing that if they put they 'make out a case to lay before the British Labour Party' they would have the best chance in their history of these colonies to self-government and unity.⁵⁷ As in the Victorian period, they drew inspiration from the contemporary concessions of rights to the white Dominions, in particular the declaration of the Imperial Conference of 1926 that the Dominions in the British Commonwealth of Nations were 'autonomous communities within the British Empire', equal and not subordinate to the United Kingdom. By 1928, Wendell Malliet published a pamphlet *The Destiny of the West Indies* which envisioned the region as a 'self-governing nation within the British Commonwealth of Nations'.⁵⁸ In the wake of the 1930 Statute of Westminster, which strengthened further the claim of the Dominions to sovereignty, Marryshow moved a motion in

⁵⁵ *The West Indian*, 1 October 1920.

⁵⁶ See Jesse H. Proctor, Jr., 'The Development of the Idea of Federation of the British Caribbean Territories', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 1957, 5(1), 12-16

⁵⁷ *Report of First British Guiana and West Indies Labour Conference* (Georgetown, 1926), pp. 21-3.

⁵⁸ A. W. Malliet, *The Destiny of the West Indies* (New York, 1928). For the context see Duke, 'The Diasporic Dimensions', 242-3.

the Legislature of Grenada to request a Royal Commission, 'to enquire into the possibility of Federation in the West Indies and into such further developments in self-government as may seem feasible to the commission'.⁵⁹ In 1932 a conference in Dominica, organised by Marryshow's local equivalent C. E. A. Rawle, with participants from around the region, resolved for the self-government of the West Indies as a federated dominion within the British Empire.⁶⁰

From 1934 to 1939, in the context of Depression, a new current of trade union and political mobilization spread across the Caribbean, capped by major riots and upheaval in every colony, which generating the modern political parties of the region.⁶¹ Still, however, the idea of negotiating freedom through the Empire and Commonwealth ideas persisted. When Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler, for example, sought to organise a radical trade union and political alternative to Cipriani in Trinidad, he gave it the name 'The British Empire Citizens' and Workers' Home Rule Party'. When the third British Guiana and West Indies Labour Conference met in Georgetown in 1944, Marryshow rose to demand, 'We want to govern ourselves in the same way as Canada governs herself.... we demand Self-Government and Dominion status for the West Indies . . . by giving us Dominion status they will have a satisfied people and we will remain in the British Commonwealth as long as it functions', to which Albert Gomes of Trinidad added, that this must be combined with 'universal adult suffrage'.⁶² A. A. Thorne, the Guianese Trade Unionist, echoed the call, with a specific warning, in the spirit of Meikle, of the threat of American domination which loomed in the 1940 lend-lease concessions to the United States of a

⁵⁹ Proctor, 'The Development of the Idea of Federation', p. 16.

⁶⁰ On Rawle's trajectory see R. Drayton, The Problem of the Hero(ine) in Caribbean History, *Small Axe*, 2011, 15(1), 26-45.

⁶¹ Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the Caribbean, 1934-39* (London, 1995) and *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement* (Oxford, 2001).

⁶² *Official Report of the British Guiana Labour Union Silver Jubilee Celebration February 27, 1944 and the Third British Guiana and West Indian Labour Conference* (Georgetown, 1944), 42-3. My copy of this pamphlet is a treasured heirloom from my father, passed to him by his step-father.

chain of military bases in the British West Indies: 'we prefer to remain within the British Empire in the same way as Canada, New Zealand and South Africa'.⁶³ Cipriani concurred 'Self-Government with Dominion status is our aim now', joined to universal suffrage. But he added a crucial qualification to loud applause:

We do not want to be a Canadian province or an American state and if we cannot continue to be member of the British Commonwealth of Nations then obviously the only step left to us is to have our own independence..... I am talking to you as a coloured man of the West Indies. British rule in South Africa is a mockery and a terrible imposition on the coloured man. American rule in the southern states of the United States is on the same plane. . . .⁶⁴

The horizon of an independence, beyond Dominion status, had come into view in the midst of World War 2.

One important driver operating in the background was the impact of the Soviet Union both as the centre of an international Communist movement and as an example. From its Second Congress in 1920, the Comintern had entangled itself with movements for national liberation around the world. The Caribbean diaspora in the United States was strongly drawn to the revolutionary project with figures like Cyril Briggs, Otto Huiswood and George Padmore first pulled into the Communist Party of the United States and then involved in clandestine political organisation and mobilization in the West Indies and Africa.⁶⁵ Black internationalism of the Pan-African cause and West Indian nationalism became entangled with Red internationalism. The West Indian National Emergency Committee of 1940, with its demand for full Caribbean sovereignty, beyond any appeal to the Commonwealth or any other kind of European trusteeship, is a direct product of the involvements of figures like Wilfred

⁶³ *Official Report of the BGLU*, 44.

⁶⁴ *Official Report of the BGLU*, 45.

⁶⁵ Jacob Zumhoff, 'The African Blood Brotherhood: From Caribbean Nationalism to Communism', *The Journal of Caribbean History*, 2007, 41:1, 200-226, Minkah Makalani *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill, 2011) and Cathy Bergin, 'Unrest among the Negroes': the African Blood Brotherhood and the politics of resistance. *Race & Class*, 2016, 57(3), 45-58.

Domingo and Richard Moore in the politics of Pan-Africanism and Communism.⁶⁶ This radical Caribbean diaspora proved a crucial catalyst both to national politics within the colonies and to federal politics.⁶⁷ Within the Caribbean, the trade unionists in 1944 resolved unanimously their 'deep appreciation of the brilliant successes of the Red Army', with Cipriani noting that apart from its military contributions the Soviet Republic had the distinction that it had given self-government to every one of the states within its borders, 'That is an example that may well be followed by England and America', to which another delegate added, 'I can truly say that that the Soviet Republic has given the lead to the Allies in giving effect to one of the Four Principles of the Atlantic Charter'.⁶⁸ This reasoning that the federal union of the USSR might be a model for the future of the British Empire, is exactly the argument which Padmore would offer in 1946 in *How Russia Transformed its Colonial Empire*.⁶⁹ Dominion status within the British Commonwealth, within these West Indian hands, had now become a possible vehicle for imagining not a white man's world, but a socialist commons under the Union Jack.

Aftermaths

In 1945, the Caribbean Labour Congress resolved that its goal was full independence via dominion status at its Barbados conference. How that Caribbean federalism from below, led by trade unions, degenerated into the weakened elite federal politics of the 1950s, is part of the history of the Cold War. Marryshow warned as late as 1950 about accepting federation without full sovereignty.⁷⁰ But the devolved nation states that emerged from the breakup of the West Indies Federation of 1958-62

⁶⁶ Jason Parker, "'Capital of the Caribbean': The African American-West Indian 'Harlem Nexus' and the Transnational Drive for Black Freedom, 1940-1948.", *The Journal of African American History*, 2004, 89 (2), 98-117.

⁶⁷ Duke, *Building a Nation*, *passim*.

⁶⁸ *Official Report of the BGLU*, 77-8.

⁶⁹ George Padmore, *How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire* (London, 1946). For an illumination of its context see Theo Williams, 'George Padmore and the Soviet model of the British Commonwealth', *Modern Intellectual History*, 2019, 16 (2), 531-559 and Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War and the End of Empire* (London, 2015).

⁷⁰ 'Britain Plays With Fire In W.I. Self Rule Delay, Marryshow Warns In Council', *The West Indian*, 1 July 1950.

attached themselves keenly to the Commonwealth. They became drivers in its transformation, in particular under the Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal, and played key roles in the movement for a New International Economic Order, and in the international campaign against apartheid, as part of the process of negotiating new international ideas of human rights.⁷¹ In the long run it was the Commonwealth of Marryshow and Nehru, and not that of Smuts and Lionel Curtis, which prevailed.

In 2018, as the same time as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference met in London, the Windrush migrant scandal unfolded.⁷² It punctured the bubble of British attempts to use the summit as the basis of a new British relationship with the Commonwealth. Boris Johnson, then British Foreign Secretary, told the journalist who had made the story into front page news in Britain, 'You really fucked the Commonwealth summit'.⁷³ For the Caribbean High Commissioners and Prime Ministers, however, the crisis actually strengthened their identifications with the Commonwealth. Those who look out from within Britain seem not always to understand what the Commonwealth means to former colonies, and why nations like Mozambique, without a British past, seek to join it. From the perspective of the Global South, the Commonwealth, with its unfulfilled promise of a community of rights, was and remains an instrument through which to negotiate interests in international society.

⁷¹ S. Ramphal, *Glimpses of a Global Life* (London, 2014). On the New International Economic Order see the special issue of *Humanity* in 2015: <http://humanityjournal.org/issue-6-1/>. On the Caribbean's role in human rights doctrine see Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights*.

⁷² Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment* (London, 2019).

⁷³ 'Chased into "self-deportation"', <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/sep/14/scale-misery-devastating-inside-story-reporting-windrush-scandal>.