Elsa Goveia: History and Nation
Chamberlain, Mary, 1947-


Published by Oxford University Press

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In a society which has been shot through by diverse inter-racial features and inter-continental thresholds, we need a philosophy of history which is original to us and yet capable of universal applications. Caribbean man is involved in a civilisation-making process (whether he likes it or not) and until this creative authority becomes intimate to his perspectives, he will continue to find himself embalmed in his deprivations – embalmed as a derivative tool-making, fence-making animal. As such his dialectic will remain a frozen round of protest.¹

So argued the Guyanese novelist, Wilson Harris, in the third of his Edgar Mittelholzer lectures delivered in Guyana in 1970, adding that, in his view, there were only two Caribbean historians – the Trinidadian C. L. R. James and his fellow Guyanese, Elsa Goveia – who came close to adumbrating such a philosophy. What was it about Goveia that, for Harris’s generation at least, rendered her and James of equal stature? While James’s philosophy of history was derived from his (albeit shifting) position within Marxism, Goveia, a generation later, subscribed to the aims of the New World Group which had been active in the Caribbean throughout the 1960s, and of which Goveia had been an early member. Her philosophy of history fitted with its aims:

New World is a movement which aims to transform the mode of living and thinking in the region. The movement rejects uncritical acceptance of dogmas and ideologies imported from outside and bases its ideas for
the future of the area on an unfettered analysis of the experience and existing conditions of the region.\(^2\)

For Goveia, involved with the movements for nationalism and independence, history was both a social project and a mode of analysis.\(^3\) The history of the Caribbean region, in its generalities and in its territorial peculiarities, offered a singular configuration of historical circumstances. The task of the historian was to enable ‘us to grasp more exactly the *unique significance* of what is present’ [emphasis added].\(^4\) It was a central and immanent role as West Indian society – contoured and scarred by the currents of class and climate, race and genocide, ignorance and superiority, isolation and vilification – metamorphosed in the middle decades of the twentieth century into political and national awareness. ‘In our earlier struggle for our political rights’, she argued in 1958, ‘it was perhaps enough to be anti-British. Now that we face Independence and the immense problems which it will bring, it has become absolutely essential that we should know whether we are West Indians.’\(^5\) Such knowledge, for Goveia, could only be achieved through understanding and acknowledging the history of slavery and its legacies. At a time when acknowledgement of this history was still part of popular forgetting, to speak openly about its dynamics, its interiority, provided the structures through which remembrance (and recognition) became permissible.\(^6\) To do this, as she argued in *A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1956), the historian must seek:

> beyond the narrative of events, a wider understanding of the thoughts, habits, and institutions of a whole society. In the society itself, in its *purpose and in its adaptive processes*, will be found the true genesis of its history [emphasis added].\(^7\)

The emergence of West Indian nationalism in the decades before the Second World War and in the decades which followed it the demands, ultimately, for an independent Caribbean were accompanied by an exploration and affirmation of Caribbean culture and a recognition of its central role in the creation of a Caribbean identity. In this, the Caribbean linked its philosophical and political hands with the anti-colonial movements in Africa and with their French counterparts there and in the Caribbean, taking up many of the ideas on black identity and solidarity which had emerged from the United States. All of these drove, and were driven by, the understanding that history had a paramount and necessary role in legitimating and locating culture. Such an understanding had to embrace the ambiguities and complicities involved in slavery. There could be no short cuts, however popular or politically expedient. ‘It is essential for West Indians’, she wrote in 1964, in a strong rebuke to Eric Williams, historian and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago,
to grasp in all its complexity the nature of the influence which slavery has exercised over their history. But they will not be able to do this until they can see the white colonists, the free people of colour, and the Negro slaves as joint participants in a human situation which shaped all their lives . . . Good intentions are not enough, and the road to hell is paved with authoritative half-truths. No one is ever liberated from the past by being taught how easy it is to substitute new shibboleths for old.8

While Goveia’s philosophy of history, and the questions she demanded of it, were (and are) part of the tool bag of the professional historian, the emphases which she placed on the need to embrace as wide a canvas as possible in the quest for historical understanding of the West Indies, the need to understand not only the centrality of slavery in West Indian history but the necessary participation of all – plantation-owner, free coloured, slave – in that society, and the importance she gave to relativity in historical analysis, gave her view on the history of the West Indies a pertinent and, at that time, revolutionary integrity. Acknowledgement that all would have been implicated, willingly or not, in the fissures of slave society, she argued, should enable the West Indies to reconcile its opposing forces and ‘develop at least a new sense of community, transcending the geographical and political divisions and the alienations of caste and race that have so far marked their common history’.9 It enabled her to argue that West Indian history had an inherent logic which allowed it to stand independently, and not as an appendage of colonial and European history. In this sense, it played directly out of, and into, the nationalist endeavour and placed her, as she fully recognized, as a product of her own historical positioning in the pre and post-independent West Indies.

* * *

Elsa Goveia was born in 1925 in the former British Guiana, one of two daughters of a middling family of mixed Portuguese descent. At a time when only a small minority of Guyanese could benefit from anything higher than an elementary education, she won a scholarship to St Joseph’s High School, Convent of Mercy, in Georgetown, and matriculated with her Higher Level Certificate at a time when an even smaller (mainly male) minority were able to do so. Elsa Goveia, as a co-student (and eventual colleague) of hers, Sister Mary Noel Menezes,10 recalls, was a daily inspiration, ‘staggering under a large pile of books, as she passed our classroom en route to solitary study in the Sister Superior’s office. It was unusual for a girl to be swotting for Higher Levels and even more unusual for her to be reading history.11 In 1944 she was the first woman to win the intensely competitive British Guiana Scholarship, and came to Britain to study history at University College, London. ‘When one considers that she comes from the colonies’, wrote Professor J. E. Neale, with breathtaking imperial condescension, to the Director of Colonial Scholars in 1947 (the year that
Elsa Goveia won the Pollard Prize for English history, the first West Indian to do so, ‘and can scarcely be compared with somebody coming out of a highly cultured West European background, she is phenomenal.12

Graduating in 1948 with First Class honours, she then proceeded to a doctorate at the Institute of Historical Research, London, under the supervision of Dr Eveline Martin. She remained there until 1950, when she took up an assistant lecturership at the newly-established University College of the West Indies (UCWI). She was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1958 and to a Chair in 1961, the first Professor of West Indian history and the first woman to hold a Chair in the University (College) of the West Indies (and probably also one of the youngest to do so). Her doctorate (eventually published in 1965 as *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*) was awarded in 1952. ‘Elsa Goveia’, as Rex Nettleford, the cultural sociologist and former vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies,13 observed, ‘was, indeed, part of a critical stage of West Indian history.14

In 1961, however, she was struck by a debilitating illness against which she was to struggle for the rest of her life. She died, tragically early, on 18 March 1980, at the age of fifty-five. The illness severely restricted her scholarly output, and with the exception of a few conference papers and articles, she published no substantial further work after 1965. Nevertheless she left behind a formidable reputation as a pioneering scholar and inspiring teacher, widespread recognition of her major contribution to the development of Caribbean culture and identity, and, above all, a highly influential philosophy and vision of society and its history which legitimated West Indian history as an autonomous field, and introduced new ways of thinking about slavery and its impact in the region. Those who knew her speak of her still with deep affection and admiration.

* * *

What then was this critical stage of West Indian history and what role did Elsa Goveia play within it? With the exception of Barbados, Bermuda and the Bahamas,15 the West Indies were governed as crown colonies, premised not on twentieth-century democratic principles, but on force of historical habit: the maintenance of law and order, a pliant and non-unionized labour force, an indifference to the economic, social, cultural or educational welfare of the majority of West Indian citizens, and an acceptance of a ‘natural’ social order rooted in racial and class divisions. Indeed, the face of the West Indies in the first three decades of the twentieth century had changed very little from the order established at Emancipation in the nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, a continuing crisis in the profitability of sugar (by far the largest sector of the economy and the largest employer), an increase in the population (from 1,719,000 in 1896 to 2,514,000 in 1936),16 coupled with the international economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s, resulted in a region ravaged by poverty, debilitating by the lack of
any political representation and riddled with social tensions and racial
divisions. Into this were injected, in the mid 1930s, large numbers of return-
ing migrants, from Panama, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the United
States. Enriched in political ideas and organizational skills, they were
increasingly critical of the British and their administration of the West
Indies, increasingly impatient with the lack of any improvement in social
conditions, and increasingly willing to engage in political action through, for
instance, the United Negro Improvement Association, or the formation of
political parties such as the Barbados Labour Party, or in Jamaica the
People’s National Party.

The region erupted in the 1930s. Starting in Cuba in 1933, riots came to
affect almost every island in the Caribbean. By 1935 it was the turn of the
British West Indies as workers in St Kitts, St Vincent, and St Lucia struck
for higher wages and land resettlement. By 1937 the disturbances had
spread to Trinidad, followed by Barbados then, in 1938, by Jamaica and
British Guiana. By the end of that year, eight people had been killed in
Jamaica, fourteen in Trinidad (two of them policemen), and fourteen in
Barbados. A Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Moyne,
was appointed to investigate the causes of the disturbances, with a focus on
the social and economic conditions of the colonies. Linking the social unrest
to lack of citizenship, and lack of citizenship to what they considered
inchoate culture and customs, the Commission deflected attention from
what was perhaps the real cause of the riots, so clearly identified by C. L.
R. James in the early 1930s: the political gulf between the rulers and the
ruled which could neither alleviate tensions nor funnel demands. In short,
there was a general lack of democratic government, self-determination and
universal suffrage, to direct resources to the interests of the majority popu-
lation, and to act for and be directly accountable to them.

The real political issues had not been addressed adequately, and neither
did they go away after the war. Indeed, well before the riots of 1937 and
1938 had exposed the crisis of confidence in the colonial government felt by
the majority of black and coloured West Indians and demonstrated the
potential of pan-Caribbean resistance, increasing numbers of West Indians
were beginning to flex their intellectual and political muscles. The Beacon
group, in Trinidad, had been founded in the early 1930s by a group of intel-
lectuals and writers which included C. L. R. James, to highlight, celebrate,
encourage and promulgate Caribbean writing. In 1932, a conference organ-
ized by the emerging black political elite, held in Roseau, Dominica,
demanded self-government and Dominion status for the West Indies,
within a Federation. Similar demands were put forward by the British
Guiana and West India Labour Congress, inaugurated in 1938 in George-
town, British Guiana, and by the Trinidad Labour Party. The People’s
National Party of Jamaica, while less committed to Federation, certainly
had self-government on its agenda. In Britain, individuals such as C. L. R.
James or George Padmore and organizations such as the League of
Coloured People or the International African Service Bureau were all advocating universal suffrage, federation, and accountability. Such views remained at the forefront of political demands for self-determination in the West Indies.\textsuperscript{22} The riots of the 1930s had crystallized those demands. They also marked a turning point. The demands were specific, focused and region-wide. They converted the post-emancipation quest for freedom into an astute recognition that emancipation could not be achieved without political self-determination and independence. The Second World War temporarily stalled the momentum for independence (although the circulation of the \textit{Havana Memorandum: Declaration of Rights of the Caribbean Peoples to Self-Determination and Self-Government}, arising from the 1940 Havana Convention, indicated that the issue was far from dormant),\textsuperscript{23} but the war itself hastened demands for decolonization, not least within the West Indies, reasserted the link between emancipation, independence and nationhood and, with the coming of post-war universal suffrage, moved the debate beyond the politically-active elites to include the black working-class majority. Nevertheless, the sense of national identity was fragile, its reinforcement hampered by what appeared as a weak intellectual tradition and sense of self-confidence.

For Elsa Goveia most of the social and racial tensions central to West Indian society were reflected in the British Guiana of her childhood and adolescence. British Guiana had long been divided along racial lines, with tensions (arguably manipulated by the colonial government)\textsuperscript{24} between the East Indians – ex-indentured servants and their descendants – and the ‘Creoles’, the descendants of the former slaves. Adding to the racial complexity of the country were the Amerindians, long since ignored in any calculation of national interest, as well as the small minorities of Portuguese, Lebanese, Chinese, and Europeans. The Portuguese in particular, introduced into the West Indies after Emancipation, were never officially considered as ‘European’, and had long been used as a buffer between the white elite and the majority Creole populations.\textsuperscript{25} British Guiana, in common with other British West Indian territories, was profoundly politicized by the 1938 riots. The riots not only proved the trigger for the establishment of trade unions and political parties, they also demonstrated, in British Guiana as elsewhere, that as the respected West Indian statesman H. W. Springer observed ‘the West Indian people have come to the end of one epoch and are at the beginning of another’.\textsuperscript{26} The impact of the riots was compounded the following year (and while the Moyne Commission was sitting in British Guiana) by the Leonora Disturbances which left four dead. Nine years later, the Enmore labour riots resulted in further fatalities. Political agitation and violence continued throughout the war and in its immediate aftermath. The re-formed Labour Party, the newly-formed Women Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) and the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), continued to campaign for a full extension of the franchise (only partially granted in
1944), and for improvement in social, medical and educational provision, while in 1945 the West Indian Conference was held in Georgetown resulting in the establishment of the pan-Caribbean Caribbean Labour Congress.

Elsa Goveia arrived in Britain in 1945, aged twenty. An astute young observer, who could claim both Portuguese and mixed-race heritage, she would have been well aware of the divisions and tensions within British Guiana, as well as the wider West Indies. Alert also to the increasing criticisms of colonialism, she would have been equally aware of the need to find some mechanism which could explain, and override, racial and ethnic differences and unite West Indians in a shared struggle. As for both earlier and later generations of Caribbean migrants, territorial identities in the Imperial capital became subsumed within a regional nomenclature. Increasingly, to be a West Indian in London involved assuming a political and cultural identity. This identity was to be reinforced with the formation, in 1946, of the West Indian Students Union with an explicit goal of fostering the idea of West Indian unity. The Union (of which Goveia was an active member from the start) lobbied for the establishment of a West Indian university, launched a newspaper with the aim of nurturing Caribbean culture, and set up a study group, led by Arthur Lewis at the London School of Economics, on economic history and development—a 'field of study', as Goveia wrote in the newsletter, 'entirely new to most of us... and we are more than ever convinced that a people must know something of its past in order to plan for the future'. Through the WISU she met, among others, Linden Forbes Burnham, who was to emerge as one of the key figures in the Guyanese Independence movement and later Guyana's Prime Minister. Although Goveia's arrival in Britain preceded the large migrations of the 1950s, she was part of a post-war student cohort who represented the intellectual cream of the Caribbean. It included politicians such as Michael Manley, Forbes Burnham and Errol Barrow, fellow historians Lucille Mathurin Mair, F. R. Augier and Douglas Hall, and the sociologist Lloyd Braithwaite, and it strengthened a significant and articulate West Indian presence already in Britain, comprised mainly of educated, and articulate black or coloured West Indians from the 1930s, for instance C. L. R. James and Harold Moody, along with those who had fought in the British armed services during the war and stayed on.

* * *

Goveia's doctoral thesis was on 'The Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century'. Her research question, deceptively simple, was innovative: 'to analyse how the society functioned and to analyse its internal structure.' Modern writers on the British West Indies', she wrote in the introduction, have laid most emphasis on the political and economic history of those colonies and particularly upon the activities of their white inhabitants.
Insofar as the slaves have attracted the attention of these writers, they have been treated chiefly as the economic agents, more or less inefficient, in the production of sugar and wealth. Definitive study of the free-coloured elements of the population has been equally neglected. Yet the study of these diverse groups, of their social relationship and of the forces which held them together as parts of a single entity which was their society, cannot be neglected if the history of the West Indies is to be reconstructed without serious distortion . . .

An analysis of the whole society necessitates more than a purely descriptive approach. I have tried to find the principle of social organisation which gave coherence to the life of the community; and, in addition, I have endeavoured to examine the influence of this principle upon the nature of the cultural contact between African and European – slave and master – in an area where the nature of this contact has been of the greatest significance in determining the form and content of the society itself.30

The ‘principle of social organization’ was slavery, and the need to maintain it. She argued that this permeated the mentalities of all involved so that everybody and every institution became complicit in its operation. As Francisco Scarano points out,

... in a brilliant insight which anticipated by a generation or more the use of the Gramscian concept of hegemony to understand slave society, she pointed out that so much energy was expended to prop up relations of domination and subordination that, in the end, the differences between masters and slaves, whites and blacks, were perceived as ‘natural’.31

At the crux of that naturalization was race, where phenotypes emerged as the visible mark of difference between free and non-free, and around which evolved an elaborate ideology of innate superiority and inferiority.

Not only was the thesis a brilliant and original piece of scholarship; it also contained clear historical messages. First, in order to understand the political, social, economic and cultural condition of the contemporary Caribbean, it was imperative to acknowledge its most formative institution – slavery – and how the attitudes and legacies of slavery echoed and endured to the present. Racism, status, poverty had their origins in the violence wreaked upon and by slave societies. Second, this history needed to be acknowledged, understood and confronted. The historian had a responsibility to pursue a professional mission in the pursuit of knowledge, and to present the past in all its complexities and contradictions. ‘Intellectual and political liberation’, she wrote later in 1964, ‘are complementary aspects of a new nation’s development.’32 It was a responsibility she took seriously; she proselytised often and spoke out fearlessly in its defence.
Taking Eric Williams to task in a stinging review of his *British Historians and the West Indies*, published in 1964, she rebuked the then prime minister for shoddy craftsmanship and potentially subverting the course of history. His book, she argued, is just not good enough either for the people or for the students of the West Indies who are likely to read it. There is no doubt that Dr. Williams name alone can and will sell whatever he chooses to write. But, since this is so, I venture to hope that he will in future choose to write no more books like the one now under review. . . . The combination of omissions and hasty dogmatisms which mars his present book will not remedy the unhappy conditions which have for so long retarded the development of our understanding of ‘the unique antecedents of the people of the West Indies.’ . . .

Only knowledge could represent the path forward. ‘In a country such as ours’ she argued in 1958 ‘where shame about the past too often fills the place that should be held by knowledge, knowledge of the past must play its part in our liberation from the bonds of the past.’ History, in other words, had to be both a social project, and historiography. But this was possible only if the historian maintained a professional approach to sources and interpretation. This meant, as she chided Eric Williams, that we cannot hold to the ‘bigoted view that we can only learn from a writer who belongs to our “side” on any question . . . the side of slavery does not make an historian automatically contemptible as a source for the study of West Indian history.’

A study of history was, also, a lesson in change. Her thesis was published in 1965. By then it had been revised and a new conclusion added which in many ways measured the political distance she had travelled in the intervening years, informed by, and drawn into, the political atmosphere which she found in Jamaica, and the activism of her peers and of a younger generation of West Indian scholars such as Lloyd Best or Walter Rodney. Drawing together the themes of her work and pointing to the future directions, she argued how the humanitarians, the free coloureds, and the slaves, all contributed to the achievement of freedom and equality before the law. For each group according to its particular means of protest helped to destroy slavery by insisting, in the face of all difficulties, that the slave society was not a sacred and unalterable way of life, as the whites who dominated it evidently believed, and *that human beings could change what human beings had made*.

It was a necessary observation as she continued to caution against complacency, arguing that the legacy of slavery still needed to be confronted and resolved. Her final paragraph was no less than a rallying cry for political protest:
now that a democratic suffrage has been established in many parts of the West Indies ... the time may be ripening for the emergence and success of renewed moments of protest. The existence of political democracy gives the partisans of radical change the hope of appealing to the large majorities still suffering from the effects of poverty and lack of opportunity to vote for effective reforming policies based on universalist social values. If they persuade the people to accept a fundamental commitment to these values, the fragmented territories of the West Indies may be enabled to develop at last a new sense of community, transcending the geographical and political divisions and the alienations of caste and race that have so far marked their common history.37

But the thesis and, later, the book, were remarkable in other ways. There had been some critical work undertaken in English in the late nineteenth and twentieth century on West Indian history but most of this was framed within, and by, a metropolitan, imperial perspective with a particular focus on policy and constitutional issues, sourced mainly from Colonial Office files.38 Broadly speaking the thrust of imperial history in Britain at the time was to focus on the development and achievements of the British Empire and, as Lord Elton put it in 1945, her ‘civilising mission’.39 From the early twentieth century a new ‘school’ of imperial history had, however, arisen in America which linked and compared the development of the West Indies with that of the early American colonies, and which focused on economic and social development. Begun initially by Charles M. Andrews, it inspired scholars such as Frank W. Pitman and Lowell Joseph Ragatz, whose *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean 1763–1833* was published in 1928. Anticipating Eric Williams’s thesis, Ragatz’s analysis of the economics of sugar production and slavery led him to argue that the economic decline of the West Indies was the cause, rather than the result, of slave Emancipation. The locus of historical attention for Ragatz, as for Pitman, was primarily the planter class; the little attention paid to slaves and slave society reflected the common prejudices of much of white, American society in the early decades of the twentieth century. ‘The West Indian negro’, wrote Ragatz, ‘had all the characteristics of his race. He stole, he lied, he was simple, suspicious, inefficient, irresponsible, lazy, superstitious, and loose in his sex relations.’40

British scholars of the West Indies, such as Richard Pares, echoed the American school and continued their preoccupation with the white elites of the West Indies, while also beginning to break new ground with detailed focus on specific plantations and islands. Yet ‘none of these works’, Goveia wrote in the bibliography to her 1952 thesis, ‘was directly concerned with the subject which I have attempted to treat’. Very little work had been undertaken from the perspective of the colonies themselves, let alone the subalterns within. To judge from her bibliography she found little inspiration from any of the leading historians of imperial history, whose works she...
must have consulted and whose seminars she would undoubtedly have attended at the Institute of Historical Research: Lillian Penson and R. W. Greaves’s seminar on British administration of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, or British foreign policy in the later nineteenth century; Vincent Harlow and Eveline Martin’s seminar on the history of British Imperial policy and administration; Eveline Martin’s seminar on the Colonial Office in the nineteenth century and administration in British Tropical Africa. She may have attended, or read, Vincent Harlow’s inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford, and perhaps have taken to heart (though drawing very different conclusions) his outline of the duties of the colonial historian to,

... see and present men [sic] and their thinking whole . . . [and] correlate the social, the economic and the political . . . To do this with comprehension, he [sic] must be explicit in testing the whole range of facts against the enduring values of the civilization which informs them . . . the historian in this field [colonial history] is investigating the projection of a civilization in all its splendour and squalor, and that the resulting reaction between communities involves a slow but inexorable testing of its moral worth.41

The focus on slave society and in particular its internal dynamic was an inspired and innovative approach, and arguably one that could only have originated from within the West Indies.42 It certainly put to the test the moral worth of the Empire. Growing up in the politically charged atmosphere of the inter-war Caribbean, observing and experiencing the privilege and disadvantage associated with race and class, Goveia’s own heritage informed her central research question. Her focus on the ‘principle of social organisation’ of slave societies helped set the agenda for West Indian history, anticipating by nearly twenty years the turn towards social history, and the move towards a more interdisciplinary approach to its study.

Although her research methods were soundly historical, her major intellectual inspiration came not from historians, American or otherwise, but from anthropologists. As she commented in her bibliography,

There is one article written by F. W. Pitman ‘Slavery in the British West Indian Plantations in the Eighteenth Century’ which appeared in the Journal of Negro History October 1926 . . . In his guide [to West Indian sources], Ragatz spoke of this article as ‘the best modern treatise on the subject.’ I found a more stimulating approach in two more recent works, concerned with related fields of study. G. Freyre The Masters and the Slaves (New York 1946), a study of slavery as a social institution in Brazil and Leyburn The Haitian People (New Haven 1948) which analyses Haitian society as a society of castes. In comparison with these two books, Pitman’s short article appeared inadequate and old fashioned.43
The Brazilian Gilberto Freyre in his 1946 study of Brazilian society, *Casa Grande y Senzala*, translated by Samuel Putnam as *The Masters and the Slaves: a Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilisation* (New York, 1946), explored the social and psychological impact of miscegenation and the interpenetration of cultures in a spirit which celebrated, rather than vilifying, the resulting cultural and racial enrichment in contemporary Brazil. The American sociologist James Graham Leyburn and his now famous study of Haiti *The Haitian People* (1948) pointed to the uniqueness of Haiti, where ‘the folkways and mores of rural Haiti are, to a degree unusual in most countries, products of local experience, uncolored by outside influence’.44

The focus, in both cases, on locality, on writing from within, on relativism – intrinsic to anthropology and ethnography – was clearly taken by Goveia as a liberating tool. ‘In the career of everyday goods, of valued things’, wrote the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff, ‘we grasp the constitution of complex social fields.’45 Indeed, her focus on slave society from within posed a challenge to the very categories through which much colonial history had been addressed. This makes one wonder whether it was Goveia that Harlow had in mind in his inaugural address (mistakenly, if so), when he railed against

> [the] rising demand today, particularly among Africans and West Indians, for histories of their own countries written by their own people. In many cases the desire is not for objective analysis but for representations of the past which help to vindicate present claims to status and respect.

On the other hand, one of the best pieces of historical research ... since the last war was produced by a West African.46 It was fascinating to watch his African mind grasp and then apply the principles and techniques of historical investigation which have been slowly evolved from the cumulative experience of generations of European scholars.47

Slavery was the institution more than any other which had shaped the contemporary Caribbean, in terms of its economic, social and racial structures, yet how slavery operated on a daily basis and at a personal level was for the most part unknown territory for historians. Goveia seemed to be following – albeit unwittingly – in the footsteps of fellow Caribbean historians. The Cuban historian, Fernando Ortiz, too, was looking to anthropology in the 1940s (and earlier). *Cuban Counterpoint*, first published in 1940 in Spanish, but translated and published in English in 1947, focused attention on the ways in which the different cultures brought together through slavery (and in Cuba, relatively recently and relatively rapidly in the nineteenth century) adjusted and adapted, leading to his notion of transculturation in slave societies – and thus anticipating by some thirty years E. K. Brathwaite’s concepts of inter-culturation and creolization. In Haiti,
the French historian Gabriel Debien, using plantation records and corres-
pondence and following in the footsteps of the Haitian ethnographer J.
Price-Mars, who had pointed to, and celebrated, the elements of Africa in
popular Haitian culture, focused his attention on the everyday lives and
negotiations of slaves in pre-revolutionary San Domingue.48

There is no evidence – at least from her bibliography – that Goveia was
aware then of the ideas of Ortiz or Debien,49 or of the notions of negrismo
in Cuba or negritude in Haiti and the Francophone Caribbean which
informed them, or indeed the wider influence of the Harlem Renaissance
with its reappraisal and celebration of black culture in the New World. Yet
one of her closest student friends was Lucille Mathurin Mair, the daughter
of Eric Walrond whose poetry had contributed so much to the Harlem
Renaissance. It is possible that some of these ideas were discussed between
them. It is unlikely, however, that these ideas had penetrated Dr Martin’s
seminar on the third floor of the Institute of Historical Research in London,
although it is enjoyable to speculate on the kind of contrapuntal impact
they might have had. Indeed, one wonders what Vincent Harlow or Eveline
Martin (with her emphasis on administrative history) made of Goveia’s
‘West Indian’ mind as it grasped and then applied the insights from anthro-
pology into explaining how the cultural, social and racial complexity of the
West Indies had been historically forged. Elsa Goveia, aged just twenty-
three when she began her doctoral thesis in 1948, introduced a new
emphasis and approach into the British historiography of the Caribbean.
Catapulted by the events of 1937 into an acute consciousness of the
meaning of ‘West Indian’, alert to the specificities of the West Indian experi-
ence, (and, perhaps, to the linkages of the black Atlantic experience),
excited by the possibilities of nationalism and regional determination, she
was part of a new cohort of historians and social scientists, writers and
activists, who in the late 1940s met at the meetings of the WISU or in the
seminars at the IHR and who began to challenge the intellectual framework
and academic disciplines of the study of West Indian history, society and
culture.

* * *

At the University College of the West Indies, lecturing in history from
1950, Goveia was pressed with a more immediate requirement to provide
research guides and material for the first cohort of West Indian history
students. In 1952 she was asked to contribute to a series on the histori-
ographies of the Americas being produced by the Pan-American Insti-
tute of Geography and History. The result was published in 1956 as A
Study of the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the
Nineteenth century. It was her first, major publication, and an outstand-
ing work of scholarship. Adopting the American historian Carl Becker’s
definition of historiography as a ‘phase of intellectual history’50 which
gives coherence, relevance and justification to the present,51 and
drawing, certainly for the earlier period, on Spanish and French as well as English sources, she offered a learned and, above all, fair interpretation and assessment of West Indian historians and writers. She located them within their period, social context and education, taking pains to balance their views with their intentions, and to retain in her discussion the weight of the original distribution of concerns. Goveia recognized that while the peculiarity of slave society was the permeation of its ideologies and practices to every sector of society, for contemporaries slavery held an ordinariness; there were far more pressing issues. It would, for instance, have been a political short cut to highlight slavery and to vilify a pro-slavery author as historically unworthy – a fault with which, as we have seen, she charged Eric Williams, and more generally one she cautioned strongly against.

For Goveia, little would have been gained by such an approach. History had to reveal the complexity of the past, and the concerns and preoccupations of those who lived before. To take one example, the Jamaican Bryan Edwards, whose two-volume *History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* was published in London in 1793: Edwards, as Goveia points out, wrote with ‘the abolitionist agitation constantly in view’; nevertheless his object was ‘to record the truth, and he collected his information extensively and used it carefully’. His political sympathies were with the West Indians and his condemnation of the Maroon uprisings in Jamaica, and of the San Domingue revolution, as evidence of a relapse into barbarism and savagery, leave us with little doubt about his ultimate loyalties. And yet, as Goveia skilfully points out, Edwards himself is forced to confront his own intellectual contradictions: he agonizes as he attempts to reconcile his experiences of slavery with the system which, in principle, he wishes to condemn, and which he certainly does condemn in others. But the value of Goveia’s book is not simply in its exposition of the tortuous posturing which slavery generated, and the development of racism which inevitably accompanied it, but in her contextualization of these historians, whom she places within a much wider political, intellectual and philosophical debate. For many of the writers, indeed, slavery itself occupied very little space. Of much more contemporary interest – certainly in the eighteenth century – was the relationship of colony to kingdom, and the rights of the colonists as full-blown Englishmen. Seen from the perspective of the West Indies, the American War of Independence is an addition to a debate on self-determination and political autonomy which had a very long antecedent.

Shortly after her *Historiography* was finished, she began work on an article on the West Indian slave laws intended, along with other chapters, for a projected three-volume reference work on Caribbean history, made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Between this and the 1965 publication of her revised thesis, she continued to publish reviews and comments in a range of scholarly and popular publications.
The University College of the West Indies, whose newly-formed history department Goveia joined in 1950, was established in 1948 as part of the post-war package of reforms. Yet ‘The dominant influence’, as Edward Kamau Brathwaite recalled, even as late as 1968 was that of certain expatriate English professors who were here – not all of them but certain of them – (one of whom informed undergraduates that) the pursuit of learning in a university is not basically a search for remedies for the ills of the outside world, [and] not a search for a state of any kind.57

Against such an ethos, West Indian academics, faculty and students alike, fought back. Setting up a university had also been part of a West Indian agenda, and its foundation was inextricably linked with a national and regional pride. Politicians, as well as academics, Goveia included, saw the University College as one possible avenue for the remedies of the region. The University College itself established early on the Institute for Social and Economic Research, to whose seminars Goveia contributed, to furnish the region with informed research on its social and economic conditions, and (in a move which Britain’s current Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, may wish to ponder) had made a survey course in West Indian history compulsory for the majority of undergraduates by 1963, when the UCWI achieved full University status. Goveia had played a leading role in devising the first course in West Indian history in 1951. Throughout the 1950s – and in the formative years of the University College – Goveia’s major energies were spent in teaching, and in helping to establish West Indian history on the school curriculum. In both, she worked strenuously to liberate the Jamaican education system – at all levels – from its colonial yoke which, modelled on the British education system, provided excellent education for an elite, continued the social divide in Jamaican society and taught little about Jamaica, or the West Indies. Working with colleagues, school teachers and the University College’s Department of Education, Goveia set about creolizing and professionalizing history and it was in part due to her efforts that by 1959 a course on West Indian history was introduced into the syllabuses of the Cambridge Overseas Higher Certificate.58

How innovatory this was is suggested by the case of Ghana, which resisted any restructuring of the school curriculum. ‘Quite the reverse,’ wrote Philip Foster in 1965, ‘deviations from the colonial curriculum were regarded often with suspicion . . . until very recently there was some reluctance to accept curricular innovation or “Africanization” at the expense of “standards”’.59

For many students at the University of the West Indies Goveia’s history classes were the first encounter with West Indian history. ‘Quite by chance’, recorded Gloria Knight,
I went into a lecture room one day when Elsa Goveia was lecturing and I was so turned-on, I couldn’t believe that history could be like that... It is something that I will not forget. She was a wonderful teacher. I never missed a lecture by her, it was a new world opening before me every time...

‘Modest and unassuming’, recalled her erstwhile colleague, K. O. Laurence, of his first meeting with her in 1959, ‘but completely in command of her subject, she had already become a legend on the Mona campus... her lectures were crowded out, and not all of those who went to hear her were students of history.’ As Woodville Marshall, one of her students and colleagues, recalled,

The fact that her early students found the experience “a revelation” says much for her own gifts of patient, thorough and enthusiastic exposition. No doubt, too, many of her students caught sparks from the fire of her own enthusiasm and were encouraged to believe that they, too, could eventually teach and even write West Indian History.

‘More than anyone else at Mona in the 1950s’, according to her contemporaries Philip Sherlock and Rex Nettleford, ‘she opened the eyes of her students and set them asking questions about their society and their identity’, teaching ‘with a kind of passion and daring... no one pursuing degree courses (Honours or General) and exposed to these teachers could have left the Mona campus without a new awareness of their unique sense of place and purpose within the emergent Caribbean’. Amongst her students – and one who clearly learnt the lesson brilliantly – was her fellow Guyanese, the young Walter Rodney, who returned to the UWI as a member of staff in 1967, taking history literally into the streets before an increasingly jittery Jamaican government banned him entry in 1968. Equally, visiting scholars to the University took advantage of Goveia’s passion and knowledge. The distinguished anthropologist of Guyana, R. T. Smith, for instance, met Goveia in 1950 at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, and she provided him with a ‘rapid and deepening of my education in contemporary and historical Caribbean problems’.

Teaching took its toll: ‘the great disadvantage of my heavy teaching duties must... be noted’, she wrote in 1961. ‘During the last 3 years, they have decisively slowed the pace of my research and publication...’ Nor was teaching the only brake on productivity. She took a keen interest in West Indian archives in Jamaica and elsewhere, lobbied continuously for the establishment of a research school in the Department of History, argued strenuously for comparative studies, for inter-disciplinarity, for an authoritative multi-volume history of the Caribbean, and for imaginative and innovative approaches to historical sources which could counteract the inherent bias of colonial records. ‘If this... is acted upon we shall be at
the beginning of exciting new developments in historical method which may enable us not only to help rewrite West Indian history but also to contribute to the development of the historical sciences as a whole."68

Goveia arrived in Jamaica in 1950, imbued with the spirit of nationalism, and at a momentous time in the struggle for West Indian independence. Universal suffrage had been granted in Jamaica and for the first time, newly-formed political parties – Norman Manley’s People’s National Party and Alexander Bustamante’s Jamaican Labour Party – began to compete for an electoral majority (with elections in 1955, 1959, 1961 and 1966). In her native British Guiana, the Marxist People’s Progressive Party, formed by Cheddi Jagan and her old friend Forbes Burnham, and led by Jagan, were swept to victory in 1953 in the first elections held under universal suffrage. They survived five months, before the British Government suspended the constitution and imprisoned Jagan. ‘The British Government asserted that “from actions and public statements of these extremists it is clear that their objective was to turn Guyana into a state subordinate to Moscow and a dangerous platform for extending communist influence in the Western Hemisphere”’.69 Suspension of the constitution led to a split between Jagan and Burnham, who went on to form the People’s National Congress, which secured power in 1964. In 1958 the Federation of the West Indies was formed, unleashing at the same time the furies of both regional belonging and national conflict. Political chords were struck across the Atlantic with the start of the civil-rights movement in the United States, with the hardening of Apartheid in South Africa and the Sharpeville massacre, and with the independence of Ghana in 1957 – which were all debated on, or protested against, among students and staff of the University of the West Indies.70 Within the Caribbean Fidel Castro took power in Cuba in 1959. The Federation proved shortlived. Jamaica opted to withdraw in 1961; Trinidad followed suit, both states were granted independence in 1962. Barbados, the last of the ‘big three’ which had formed the nucleus of the Federation, was granted independence in 1966, followed during the 1970s by most of the remaining British West Indian territories.

It was a heady period. The task of nation building became more urgent, and the role of the West Indian intellectual within it more central. The quest for independence may have united West Indians and momentarily concealed existing class and caste division in pursuit of a greater goal. Independence, however, inevitably demanded that the exigencies of the present be addressed, for issues of democracy and autonomy exposed social and cultural divisions. Moreover, the legacy of colonialism which many of the political leaders (notably but not exclusively Norman Manley) emphasized as the source of contemporary problems necessarily obscured the importance of slavery. ‘Any nationalist struggle that downplayed or ignored slavery’, noted Anthony Bogues, ‘could not tap into all the complex imaginations required for the new nation.’71 In 1963 the New World Group was formed by Lloyd Best in Guyana and moved to Mona the following year,
with Goveia as an active member. Its aims and its style were consciously radical:

First, to fashion theory on which may be based the clear intellectual leadership for which the nation calls and which it has never had. The second is to conduct the enquiry on which theory can be soundly based. This is what may be called, in the jargon of my original trade, the creation of intellectual capital goods. Thirdly, we are to establish media by which these goods may be transmitted to the rest of us who are otherwise engaged.

Through its seminars and journal, the New World Quarterly Review, it attempted to intervene in the shaping of Caribbean politics and society. Pan-Caribbean in scope, its brief – to develop a specifically Caribbean focus on contemporary Caribbean issues and politics – although primarily social and economic was broadly applied, and the Review published items on culture and the arts in a conscious attempt to broaden readership and incorporate popular culture. In this, they created a public profile, contributed in a significant way to public debate, and maintained that only a cross-disciplinary approach to understanding Caribbean society could develop the new tools and themes required for fundamental change. At a time in Jamaica when Norman Manley was attempting to build a stable but essentially conservative society, Elsa Goveia, in a major article published in the Review in 1965 (but based on a seminar given earlier), pressed home the theme of, and need for, change, skilfully exposing the tensions inherent in contemporary arguments on economic planning and political democracy, which she argued were insufficiently understood. The legacy of the history of slavery in the West Indies was a sharp social divide based on race and class. While this remained the case it would sabotage change, and until it was addressed economics and politics stood in danger of pulling in opposite directions. Economic planning would continue to benefit the economic elite (wealthy, commonly white), even though political democracy gave power to the majority (poor, commonly black). Reformism – of the kind advocated by Manley – would continue to reinforce existing social divisions and hierarchies. Economic democracy, in her view, must be based on the same principles on which the newly-acquired political democracy was based; and must include effective provisions for opening the channels of communication which have hardly begun to be made available to the mass of the population for expressing their economic and social interests and values. This requires institutional reorganisation which will bring a redefinition of prevailing concepts of authority, as well as a redistribution of wealth and a new attribution of status. Only far-reaching educational reforms can make this kind of system work; and education always takes time . . .
The need to generate or rather illuminate a distinctive Caribbean identity was urgent. History provided the key not only to exposing the nature and cause of social division, divisions peculiar to Caribbean slave society, but also an integration which such divisions had, paradoxically, created. While many of the sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s – Edith Clarke, M. G. Smith, Orlando Patterson – emphasized pluralism in the contemporary Caribbean (essentially a society in which discreet sectors operated in parallel) the notion of synthesis lay, for the most part, with historians. Marked out by Goveia in *Slave Societies* it was developed and provided with a cultural angle by her colleague at Mona, Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The notion of creolization, of the ‘inter-culturation’ between Africa and Europe, became a seminal concept in the growth of Caribbean nationalism in the immediate post-independence period. Brathwaite himself – largely on the persuasion of Goveia – had returned to England in the 1960s to pursue a doctorate at the University of Sussex, and in 1967 with the Trinidadian John LaRose and the Jamaican Andrew Salkey, founded the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM). That same year they held their first conference at the University of Kent and Elsa Goveia (on research leave in the UK) was invited to open the conference.

This was, from all accounts, an electrifying experience. Speaking on ‘The Socio-Cultural Framework of the Caribbean’ – not at first glance the most exuberant title – she set the agenda not only for the conference but for subsequent debate, hammering home her essential theme: Caribbean societies were characterized by deep divides, marked primarily along the boundaries of language and religion, and coinciding with the distribution of wealth and influence. While these divisions owed their origin to the racial and colour stratification of slave societies, their universal acceptance served as a common unifying factor:

> It is still there in the West Indies and it is one of the elements which still integrate the West Indian society, though it is obviously to the disadvantage of the great majority of the West Indian population. This divisive kind of integration is shared by all of the groups in the West Indies . . .

This racial order, she argued – which placed the minority whites in a position of superiority, the majority blacks in subordination, the coloured population in an intermediate position – still existed despite universal suffrage which for the first time had given superior political power to the majority black population. The tension between the old social order and the new political dynamic – she told the artists – *must* be at the heart of all artistic endeavour. The role of the artist in the new nation was to expose that tension and seek to end it, to be involved in inspiring and pointing to the future of that nation. But, she cautioned in her concluding statements,

> Until we have made a choice between the conflicting elements of which our society is composed at present, between the inferiority/superiority
ranking according to race and wealth, and the equality which is implied by the slogan of one man one vote, until we have made up our minds about that particular choice, we are not going to be able ... to be sufficiently sure of ourselves, of our own identity, to produce art or writing or any of the other creative forms of activity including ... the activity of teaching both in schools and universities. Until we have made this choice we are not going to be in a position to be really creative as individuals because our energies are going to be absorbed by the terrible job of working from two completely different sets of premises; from the inferiority/superiority premise on the one hand, and from the one man one vote premise on the other ... The problem is one of urgency ...80

C. L. R. James considered her intervention ‘explosive’, a view endorsed by George Lamming and Eric Huntley.81 It echoed throughout the conference and beyond, as the speech was published first in the CAM newsletter and then in Savacou. It was a call to arms, and a clear recognition of the importance of the arts and culture in the creation of a Caribbean identity, and the resolution of its paradoxes. Culture – whether art or literature, calypso or folk dance (and Goveia refused to distinguish) – was to be the vanguard of the new integration, ‘consciously done as a choice about the way in which we want the West Indian society and the West Indian culture to grow’.82

In retrospect, with nearly forty years of subsequent historiography, and a new field of post-colonial literary and historical studies, the full impact of Goveia’s speech may be difficult to appreciate. This was the first conference of the newly-formed artists’ movement, committed, engaged and passionate about the role of art in their societies, and fully aware of the ground-breaking forms taking shape in their art. The British West Indies were only just emerging as independent states; universal suffrage was not yet a generation old; the riots of the 1930s which triggered the start of the independence movements were well within living memory; the burgeoning of literature and the arts was barely a decade old; race awareness was centrally on the agenda. (Rastafarianism and Black Power were potent forces pulling in one direction, while the example of Guyana, racked by race riots in 1962–3 between Indians and Afro-Guyanese, pulled in another). The University of the West Indies – the beacon of Federation (and now its last surviving remnant) – enjoyed a new and unique status in West Indian society, heralding the end of intellectual isolation of the West Indies (contemporaries included Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite) and a conscious revisioning of both the past and the present. Goveia was one of the earliest who dared to identify and speak out on the intolerable and impossible racial cleavages upon which the West Indies had been premised hitherto. She did it with an informed, confident and fluent voice and in a quiet, but authoritative manner, let us know that such a society was unsustainable.

But if Goveia was totally committed to an idea of the West Indies, to its
struggles for nationhood and identity, and to the role of history in all this, she was just as committed to upholding the standards of professional history. A generation of new and politically active Caribbean historians find this objectivity uncomfortable, perhaps mistaking her Beckerite relativism for exoneration, her humanitarian sympathies as a refusal to criticize. In this she is (it may for some be the ultimate betrayal) a ‘historian’s historian’; but she had her finger on the pulse of change, and pointed, with lethal accuracy, at the source of West Indian discontent, and at its solution.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am grateful to Bill Schwarz and Catherine Hall for their encouragement and constructive criticism of drafts of this article, and to Professors Sir Roy Augier and K. O. Laurence, for sharing their memories of, and thoughts on, Elsa Goveia, and for their comments, to Professor Woodville Marshall for the same and for also directing me towards Goveia’s humanist mentors and other sources, and to Richard Drayton and Constance Sutton for their advice and guidance. All gave generously of their time and opinions, although they must carry no responsibility for any errors or misjudgements in the final account.

3 ‘Ever since the time of emancipation we have been trying to combine quite opposite principles in our social system. But sooner or later we shall have to face the fact that we are courting defeat when we attempt to build a new heritage of freedom upon a structure of society which binds us all too closely to the old heritage of slavery. Liberty and equality are good consorts, for, though their claims sometimes conflict, they rest upon a common basis of ideas which makes them reconcilable. But a most profound incompatibility necessarily results from the uneasy union which joins democracy with the accumulated remains of enslavement. In the end, either one or the other must be undermined by the constant antagonism of mutually intolerant elements.’ Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* New Haven and London, 1965, p. 338.
4 Elsa V. Goveia, *An Introduction to the Federation Day Exhibition on Aspects of British West Indian History*, n.p. (but presumably University College of the West Indies), n.d. (but presumably 1958), Spanish Town, Jamaica, p. 41.
6 See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, New York, 1980. Halbwachs argues that every society has the ‘frameworks’ which permit and fashion recollection. Without these, recollection would not be possible.
10 Sister Mary Noel Menezes was a key figure in the establishment of the Department of History at the University of Guyana. She was the author of a number of works on the Portuguese in Guyana and on the (much-neglected) Amerindians.
13 Nettleford was also a founder of the Jamaican National Dance Theatre Company and remains its choreographer.
14 Nettleford, ‘Forward’.
15 In those colonies with elected legislatures, stringent property and income hurdles restricted the franchise. Even in 1939 those able to vote represented only ten per cent of the population. See Cary Fraser, ‘The Twilight of Colonial Rule in the British West Indies: National Assertion versus Imperial Hubris in the 1930s’, Journal of Caribbean History 30: 1–2, 1996, pp. 1–27.


18 The British government, fearful that the Commission’s report would trigger further unrest, postponed its publication until after World War Two.

19 Fraser, ‘Twilight of Colonial Rule’, p. 15.


22 Fraser, ‘Twilight of Colonial Rule’, p. 15.


26 Cited in Parry and Sherlock, Short History of the West Indies, p. 286. Sir Huw Springer, an Oxford trained lawyer and a trade-unionist, was first general secretary of the Barbados Workers Union, and Governor-general of Barbados 1984–1990.

27 Lloyd Braithwaite, Colonial West Indian Students in Britain, Kingston, 2001. Braithwaite does however point out that students from British Guiana, in the early years, had also formed their own student organization and, in some cases, actively distanced themselves from their fellow West Indians by stressing their mainland American connections.

28 Cited in Walmsley, Caribbean Artists Movement, p. 5.


33 Goveia ‘New Shibboleths for Old’.

34 Goveia, Introduction to the Federation Day Exhibition, p. 42.


36 Goveia, Slave Society, p. 337.


38 These were also Goveia’s sources, but her take on them was very different.


42 In much the same way that C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins (1938) was inspired by and from the West Indies.


46 Most likely he was referring to the Nigerian historian, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1880–1885 (Oxford Studies in African Affairs), Oxford, 1956. Dike was a contemporary and close friend of Goveia’s and became the vice-chancellor of the University of Ibadan.

47 Harlow, The Historian and British Colonial History, p. 10. Goveia (and F. R. Augier), many years later in the Times Literary Supplement, observed ‘The eagerness of the young
colonial post-graduates after the Second World War to write the history of their own countries was a cause of concern to some of their English tutors: Elsa V. Goveia and F. R. Augier, ‘Colonialism From Within’, Times Literary Supplement, 28 July 1966.


49 Neither work is cited in the bibliography to her thesis or in its 1965 published edition, although they are referred to in the TLS article co-written with F. R. Augier, ‘Colonialism From Within’. She also provided an introduction to Debien’s work ‘Gabriel Debien’s contribution to the history of French West Indian slavery’. In Papers presented at the Third Annual Conference of Caribbean Historians, April 15–17, 1971, Georgetown, 1971, pp. 40–8, notes pp. 116–9.


51 ‘The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world. The history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history, is living history, that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective spurious present, the spurious present of Mr. Everyman. It is for this reason that the history of history is a record of the “new history” that in every age rises to confound and supplant the old . . . However accurately we may determine the “facts” of history, the facts themselves and our interpretations of them, and our interpretations of our own interpretations, will be seen in a different perspective or a less vivid light as mankind moves into an unknown future. Regarded historically, as a process of becoming, man and his world can obviously be understood only tentatively, since it is by definition something still in the making, something as yet unfinished.’ (Carl Becker, ‘Everyman His Own Historian’, American Historical Review 37: 2, 1932, pp. 235–6)

52 A perspective which was a precursor of what Hannah Arendt was to term the ‘banality of evil’. See Hannah Arendt Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil, London, 1954.

53 Goveia ‘New Shibboleths for Old’, p. 35. (See above.)

54 See, for instance, Goveia and Augier, ‘Colonialism from Within’, in which the authors caution against the temptation to act as the new ‘court historians’ of the newly-liberated nations.

55 Goveia, Historiography, p. 80.

56 This was eventually published as ‘The West Indian slave laws of the eighteenth century’ Revista de Ciencias Sociales 4: 1, 1960, pp. 75–106.


58 Sherlock and Nettleford, University of the West Indies, p. 83.

59 Laurence, Obituary of Elsa Goveia.


61 The University College of the West Indies was located at Mona, Kingston, Jamaica and within the University community was always referred to as ‘Mona’.

62 Sherlock and Nettleford, The University of the West Indies, p. 206.

63 After his expulsion from Jamaica, Rodney went to Tanzania where he researched and wrote How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (London, 1972). In 1974 he returned to his native Guyana to be Professor of History. This appointment was cancelled by the Government. In 1980, Rodney was assassinated. Goveia’s ill health in 1968 when Rodney was expelled from Jamaica prevented her taking an active role in the Rodney affair.

64 Sherlock and Nettleford, The University of the West Indies, p. 206.

65 Rodney went to Tanzania where he researched and wrote How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (London, 1972). In 1974 he returned to his native Guyana to be Professor of History. This appointment was cancelled by the Government. In 1980, Rodney was assassinated. Goveia’s ill health in 1968 when Rodney was expelled from Jamaica prevented her taking an active role in the Rodney affair.


1984, p. 2. (A short piece Goveia had written in 1961, reprinted as introduction to this special issue on her.)
68 Goveia and Augier, ‘Colonialism From Within’.
70 See Sherlock and Nettleford, University of the West Indies, pp. 79–94.
72 Others included Kassim Bacchus, George Beckford, Edward Carrington, Norman Girvan, Owen Jefferson, Vaughan Lewis, Alister McIntyre, Orlando Patterson, Selwyn Ryan, Clive Thomas and LeRoy Taylor (Sherlock and Nettleford, University of the West Indies).
73 Lloyd Best, quoted in Sherlock and Nettleford, University of the West Indies, p. 126.
74 For an interesting discussion on Manley, Creole nationalism, and Rastafarian resistance, see Bogues, ‘Politics, Nation and PostColony.’
75 Elsa V. Goveia, ‘Past History and Present Planning in the West Indies’, New World Quarterly Review 2: 1, Dead Season [summer/autumn], 1965, p. 78. (The Dead Season, also known as the Hard Season, was the term used for the non-harvest period in the sugar cycle—roughly the late summer and autumn, it was a time when rations were low, nutrition was low, humidity high and slave mortality rose sharply.)
76 The anthropologist R. T. Smith argued strongly against M. G. Smith’s ‘pluralism’ thesis.
81 Walmsley, Caribbean Artists Movement, p. 98. Eric Huntley and his wife Jessica, political activists in Guyana, came to Britain in 1956 and 1957 respectively. They founded, in 1967, the Bogle L’Ouverture Press.