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**Robert Anthony Waters, Jr.** "‘A Betrayal of the Cause of Colonial People the World Over’: The British Caribbean Against Jagan." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 43:1 (2009): 115-135.

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Review by **Cary Fraser**, The Pennsylvania State University

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In this article, Robert Waters makes an effort to explore the internal dynamics and tensions of the decolonization process in the British West Indian colonies during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly among the leaders of the four colonies that gained their independence in the 1960s – Jamaica (1962), Trinidad and Tobago (1962), Barbados (1966) and Guyana (1966). Of particular interest to Waters are the tensions that roiled the region as a result of the British and American concerns about Cheddi Jagan, the Indo-Guyanese leader of British Guiana, and his penchant for espousing pro-Soviet sentiments and Marxist-Leninist thinking. Jagan’s embrace of Marxist-Leninist thought and his marriage to a radical Jewish American activist, Janet Rosenberg, who was a fervent admirer of the Soviet Union, had become a source of concern by the early 1950s to moderate West Indian nationalists, to the Colonial Office, and to the United States. The multi-ethnic People’s Progressive Party (PPP) they founded and led had won the first election in the colony based upon universal suffrage in 1953. Within less than six months of that victory, the British government, alleging a communist “threat” to the colony, sent troops to British Guiana to remove the PPP, suspend the constitution, and install an interim government that would provide a vehicle for undermining the PPP and its leadership of the nationalist movement in the colony. In 1955, the party split into “moderate” and “radical” factions which later mutated into ethnic blocs that helped to fragment the wider society. After the original PPP splintered, the British reached an accommodation with Jagan and the PPP was re-elected to lead the colony in 1957 and 1960 as constitutional devolution to bring an end to colonial rule was resumed.

The possibility that the British would agree to independence for the colony by 1963 under Jagan disturbed the Kennedy administration and led to increasing American pressure on the British to ensure the ouster of Jagan. The Americans and the British mounted a successful covert program to destabilize the Jagan government and to secure the election in 1964 of a pro-American coalition led by the former Jagan ally, Forbes Burnham, and the rabidly anti-communist Roman Catholic businessman of Portuguese origin, Peter D’Aguiar.

This coalition was then entrusted with the task of leading the colony to independence. Over the period 1962-64, that Anglo-American covert action program exacerbated communal tensions, which resulted in violence and created yet-to-be-healed ruptures in the mosaic of religious and ethnic communities that were to be found in the colony.

This is the context within which Waters attempts to provide some insights into the efforts of other West Indian nationalist leaders to influence developments in British Guiana. It is a welcome addition to the research done on British Guiana during this period and it illustrates the shifting contours of the Cold War in the Caribbean archipelago – before and after Fidel Castro’s accession to power in 1959. The article provides some additional information on the roles of West Indian leaders like Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley of Jamaica, Grantley Adams and Errol Barrow of Barbados, and Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, as they confronted the unfolding tragedy that overtook British Guiana after 1953. It also adds to the work done by Colin Palmer in his analysis of the role played by Eric Williams, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in trying to create the conditions for an internal settlement among the nationalist leaders in British Guiana in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

Waters emphasizes that Williams was motivated to engage in the difficult diplomacy of bridging the divide in British Guiana as a way of trying to contain the possible repercussions of the violence in British Guiana for Trinidad’s own ethnic mosaic where Indo-Trinidadians constituted the largest minority community. Thus British Guiana’s tensions were a concern to West Indian nationalists as the ideological/ethnic conflicts in that colony increased American and British involvement in the affairs of the region and compromised the West Indian efforts to create a regional framework for the consolidation of West Indian independence. As Waters shows, the struggle for British Guiana’s independence had local, regional, hemispheric, and international ramifications given the extraordinary sensitivities of American policymakers – from Eisenhower to Johnson. Jagan’s ideological proclivities, before and after the Cuban revolution, triggered profound concerns about America’s strategic control over its sphere of interest in the Caribbean in light of the post-war decolonization process in the British Caribbean colonies.

While Waters has extended the analysis of the significance of British Guiana and Jagan’s trajectory in the 1950s and 1960s, it would have been useful to have seen a more thorough examination of the role of labor leaders in the West Indian colonies in helping to shape the negative perceptions of Jagan. The Jagans’ preference for a relationship with the World Federation of Trade Unions over ties to the International Confederation of Trade Unions had been a critical factor in the growing difference of views with Norman Manley and other West Indian labor leaders in the early 1950s. The condemnation of the PPP by regional leaders after its ouster by the British government in 1953 was an early indication of the rift that had emerged and which was never healed in the regional labor movement. Thus, by the early 1960s, Jagan’s alienation from the other West Indian nationalist leaders had become an ongoing problem and Jagan, given his ideological rigidity, proved incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> See Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 198-234.

healing the breach. In effect, Jagan's problems with other leaders in British Guiana mirrored his poor relationship with the nationalist leaders in the Caribbean. They, in turn, did little to help Jagan overcome the negative press and, on occasion, displayed their overt hostility to him and his political goals.

While Janet Jagan and her radical vision of politics was undoubtedly a powerful influence upon her husband, it should also be recognized that Jagan had studied, worked, and lived in the United States during the Great Depression and the New Deal. This was a period of remarkable intellectual openness in American life and perhaps Jagan's inability to recognize the limited appeal of his ideological vision in the West Indian context was due to his experiences and his exposure to a wider world and its debates in the United States. For West Indian nationalist leaders who saw America in pragmatic terms as an ally to bring an end to British colonial rule, they had little tolerance for Jagan's perspective and the derogation of the West that it implied. A key attribute of the West Indian nationalist leadership was the pragmatic appreciation that West Indian poverty was the biggest challenge facing the region and that American investment would be an important tool for addressing the economic stagnation of the region. For Jagan, the Soviet Union had become an alternative vision of modern society but he was unable to recognize that the Soviets had little strategic interest in British Guiana, and would never invest the level of resources necessary to promote the scale of economic development that he promoted.

It was this fundamental difference in worldview that shaped Jagan's relationship with other West Indian leaders. For Jagan, engagement with the Soviet Union would offer opportunities for economic development and social change. For the moderate nationalist leaders, such engagement could forestall the chance to obtain American and other international investment to deal with the economic problems of the region. In addition, "Operation Bootstrap" stood as a symbol of the American willingness to promote industrial development in the Caribbean. It was perhaps telling that the other regional leaders who had reservations about Jagan's former ally and subsequent foe, Forbes Burnham, were quite willing to work with him once he adopted the pragmatic approach to dealing with the Western powers that they themselves had embraced.

It was an irony of the West Indian national struggle that Jagan, who had been educated in the United States, proved to be so uncomfortable with American influence in the Caribbean, while his British educated counterparts were so willing to use American influence to accelerate the process of decolonization and to promote investment and economic diversification. Waters has encouraged scholars of American foreign policy and the Caribbean to think about the complex dynamics of decolonization as a Cold War dilemma for the superpowers, the colonial powers, and for the non-European nationalists who sought to transform the world and their roles therein.

**Cary Fraser** is the author of *Ambivalent Anti-Colonialism: The United States and the Genesis of West Indian Independence, 1940-1964* (Greenwood, 1994) and his essays on the Middle East, American foreign policy during the Cold War, and Caribbean political history, have been published in Canada, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom

## **H-Diplo Article Review**

and the United States. He is currently writing a book on race in American domestic politics and foreign policy since the 1930s.

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\*Rev. B- Corrected Michael Manley reference (on page 2) to Norman Manley.