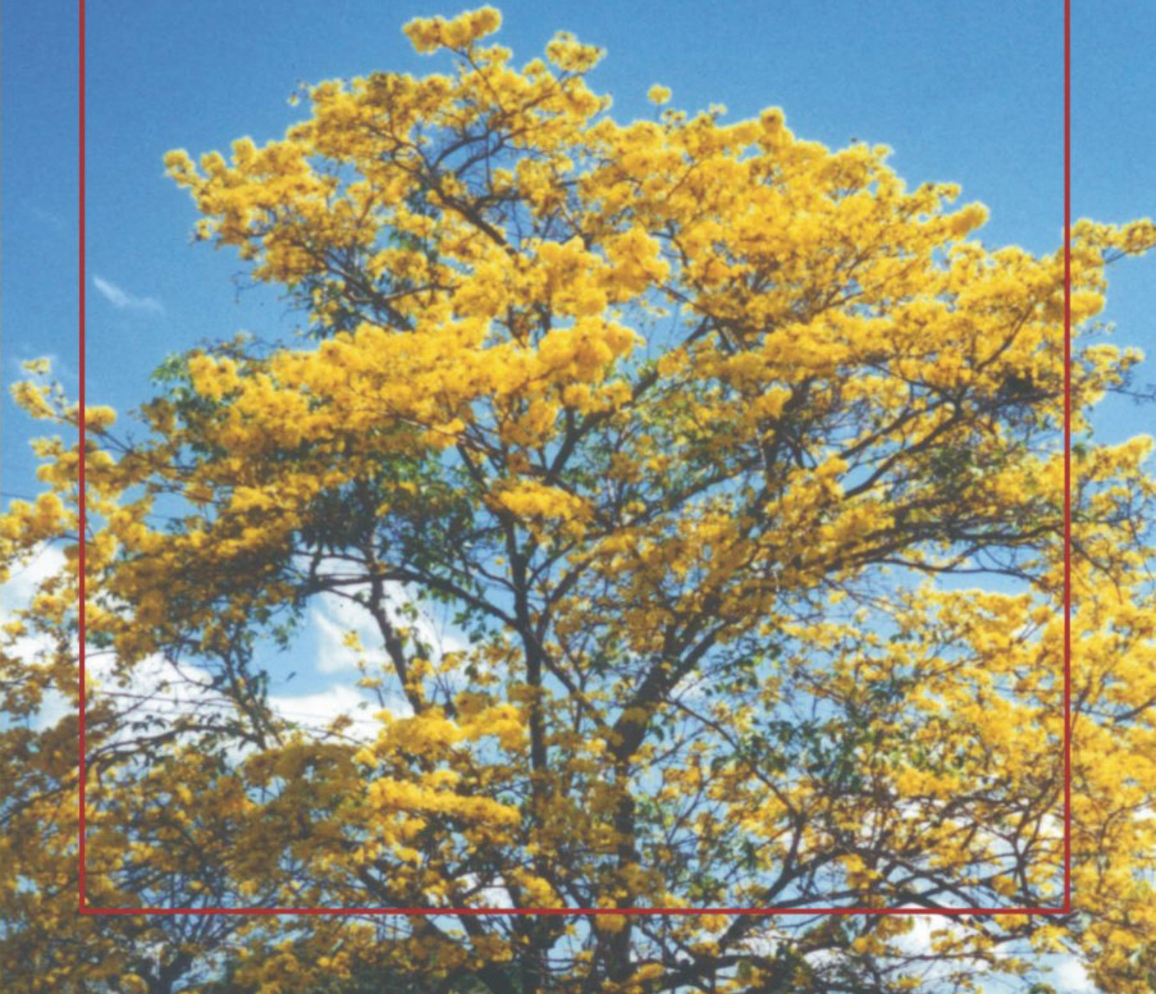
KENNETH RAMCHAND

THE WEST INDIAN NOVEL and its BACKGROUND



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In memory of
Justice Leo P.E. Ramchand (1930-1999)

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Preface to the Second Edition

The 1970 text has not been interfered with, neither has the original arrangement been altered. *The West Indian Novel and its Background* remains an attempt to see the West Indian novel in its social and cultural context without shirking the critical task. Literary criticism can only benefit from literary scholarship and background studies if it retains its identity as criticism. The contexts are presented in order to make the novels more easily accessible, and not because of a primary interest in the conditions that are said to have produced the novels. There is a danger of losing one's sense of the mystery of the creative act and of the secrecy of the text in the presumption that one can pin down, or even worse, pile up in an encyclopaedic and entangling manner all the inputs that went into the making. Can one do this and not 'take thunder for granted'?

The pleasure of recognising the familiar is a legitimate pleasure for readers of literature, but it will only serve conservatism and self-indulgence if there is not a readiness for literature's exciting other side – the process by which it deconstructs and defamiliarises, and so promotes transformation both in the lives of individuals and in the structures of societies.

Although attention is paid in chapter VI, 'The Language of the Master?', to orality and to the implications of the spoken language (the most creative aspect of oral tradition), the concern of the book is with writing. Writing may have come into being to represent speech, but once it began to exist it took on other functions, learnt to serve language and thought without always referring to the middleman of speech, as it were. So it is better to think of writing and speech as related but independent systems, each able to draw upon and influence the other, and both in healthy contact enriching the language of which they are aspects.

Twelve years ago, one did not formulate it so, nor did one think to express in so many words the instinctive knowledge that unless the users of our language came to terms with writing, the language would shrivel into a secret code or shriek, a frustrated cry and our society would fail to meet the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. The account of the differences between the language of narration and the language of the characters, and the description of the closing of the gap between them from both directions in chapter VI, remains important for critical analysis and for sociocultural commentary.

A glance at the table of contents will show that the structure of the book was partly called forth by the different racial/social groupings in the islands. The specific groups and the literature of which they are the raw material, were brought into focus not to insist on difference but to show that, in addition to our common humanity, the experience of each group is of interest as part and type of a recent historical experience – the meetings and confrontations within a short space of successive waves of migrants coming, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, from a number of different countries to live, work or slave in these islands. The discussions of the original inhabitants (chapter VIII 'Aborigines'), white West Indians (chapter XIII 'Terrified Consciousness'), the whites and the coloureds (chapters II and III), people of African origin (chapter VII), people of Indian origin (chapter XI) and the fictions dealing with them, proceed out of a West Indian perspective. One can see now, from the direction the chapters take and from the ordering of the parts, that there is a bias in favour of somehow taking advantage of our multiple heritage.

In Trinidadian Earl Lovelace's novel, *The Dragon Can't Dance*, a character who is given as being of Indian origin sees his failure to be accepted into the African community as partly the result of his mistaken feeling that he must deny his Indianness in order to become visible to his African countrymen:

> I wish I woulda go in there where they was making their life anew in fire, with chisel and hammer, and sit down with my sitar on my knee and say: Fellars, this is me, Pariag from New Lands. Gimme the key! Give me the Do Re Mi. Run over the scale. Leh we Fa So La! Gimme the beat, lemme hear! Listen to these strings. And let this music cry too, and join in the crying. Let it scream too. Let it sing 'bout Dolly in the old ramshackle house in Tabaquite, with the smell of green grass and cow dung. Let it laugh with Seenath, Bali and Ramjohn playing all fours, singing bullseyes in the pavilion of New Lands recreation ground. Let it groan with the groaning weight of tons and tons of sugar cane on top his grandfather's frail shoulders. Let it smile with his uncle Ramlochan sitting at the window with his dark shades on. And he smiled, thinking of Miss Cleothilda and her 'All o' we is one'. No. We didn't have to melt into one. I woulda be me for my own self. A beginning. A self to go in the world with, with something in my hands to give. We didn't have to melt into one. They woulda see me. (p. 210)

This is controversial ground. The problem of the relationship between sub-groups within a particular society is confused in the West Indies by the question of each sub-group's relationship to the country from which it came originally, or its idea of that country. It is possible that in working towards a

vision of the larger grouping as West Indians, one did not take sufficient account of the emotive force of the tribalisms from which the different groups in the West Indies are still evolving. *The West Indian Novel and its Background* was conceived and written towards the end of a ten-year absence from the islands. If it were being written now, after more than ten years of living and working amidst the realities of post-Independence racialisms, it might have been difficult to write with the idealism of the earlier more hopeful period.

We hanker after objectivity and validation only because we recognise the deeply subjective nature of our constructions of reality. When, as in the West Indies, literature is implicated in the colonial's remaking of his world, the literary critic cannot avoid seeming to stray from the pure critical task and he cannot hope to avoid being involved in controversies of a larger, sociocultural nature. One sought to reinstate white West Indian writers, to enter the Trinidad Indian world of *A House for Mr. Biswas* and to explore the West Indian interest in Africa in ways that literary critics are equipped to do. Whatever agreement or disagreement there may be with the critic's sociocultural views, it should be possible for the criticism to do its work as criticism.

Some readers have found Part I of the book useful as providing a necessary background for understanding the milieu and the conditions under which West Indian writing and the attitudes to West Indian writing began to take shape. Others, already familiar with the context, have responded more to Parts II and III where there are long stretches of literary criticism. These preferences obviously relate to subjective requirements. One has changed and the situation has changed so the book would be different if it were being written today. But I am glad to have been the author of *The West Indian Novel and its Background* and cannot wish to make alterations at this time.

Since the book first appeared, at least two writers have established reputations that must last and a third was sadly cut off after having shown the greatest promise. Garth St Omer, born in St Lucia in 1931, has had four separate but interrelated works published between 1968 and 1972. St Omer's style is unobtrusive, his tone controlled yet relaxed. Sentence by sentence he works away at us, penetrating deeply without a violent break-in. Few West Indian writers convey so movingly and depressingly the sense of economic and cultural conditioning while exploring motives and impulses too minute and deep to be explained away by social conditioning. With *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Earl Lovelace, born in Trinidad in 1935, has achieved major stature as a novelist, a standing confirmed by a subsequent work *The Wine of Astonishment* written before *The Dragon* but heavily revised after that work was published.

Lovelace's exploration of the gap between role self and real self, and his sense of the newness of possibility in the New World, make him one of the most inspiring of writers from the islands. Harold Sonny Ladoo, born in Trinidad in 1945, produced two novels, *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays. No Pain Like This Body* is a compassionate and rough account of life in a rural community of Trinidad Indians living in a backwater. Ladoo's account of one side of Indian life in Trinidad is even more raw and abrasive in the second book. The setting is still a backward Indian group, but Ladoo takes us into a bawdy world of chicken farm sexuality, coarseness, cynicism and customary violence, the extreme degeneration of a lost community.

At the centre of the novel's farcical happenings – excremental and sexual – is the ambition of Poonwa to travel: 'I will go into the white country with the Hindu Bible and the whip.' Behind Ladoo's farce is the tragedy of a community of other Indians stewing in the emptiness of traditional cultural forms they know so little about, and in the psychological denudation of a colonialising process they hardly realise they have been subjected to. Ladoo's intensity and the violent energy of his fictional community suggest a case for closer reading and more searching social analysis. His death in Trinidad in 1973 could have been murder connected with a property dispute. It was undoubtedly a loss to West Indian literature.

Of the established writers, V.S. Naipaul and Wilson Harris, both writing from outside the West Indies, and both drawing their raw material more and more from other parts of the world, have enhanced their reputations. Harris' readership remains small but intense and enthusiastic; with the establishment of his reputation in America, Naipaul's works have the status of bestsellers even though they are intelligent and well-written. After a long silence, George Lamming produced *Natives of My Person* and *Water with Berries*, while another old hand, Sam Selvon, followed his *Moses Ascending* with an account of the exile's return to the islands, *Moses Migrating*, due to be published in 1983. Perhaps the most spectacular turn of fortune came with the rediscovery of Jean Rhys. Following the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Miss Rhys' earlier works were reprinted. These include *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) one of the earliest of the négritude novels from the English-speaking West Indies, and *The Left Bank* (1928) which contains West Indian stories. The further collections *Tigers are Better Looking* (1968), *Sleep it Off, Lady* (1976) and an autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979), have confirmed the West Indianness of this major author.

The author bibliography and the year by year bibliography have been brought up to 1982, and a new section covering criticism has been added.

Author's Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is a version of a thesis presented at the University of Edinburgh. The late Professor John Butt gave his encouragement at a time when the subject of this study was not yet in fashion. I am also grateful to the university for financial assistance at a particularly difficult time; and to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom which financed part of the research. To my colleagues and students at Edinburgh I owe much that cannot be specified. Paul Edwards made it impossible for me to forget that life can be as interesting and enjoyable as literature.

During the period of conversion from thesis to book there was great support from colleagues in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Kent, and financial assistance through the Dean. To Brinsley Samaroo, who took time away from his own researches to comb the manuscript for errors and infelicities, I am also grateful.

It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to the staff of the National Library of Scotland for their courtesy and helpfulness over a long period; thanks are due also to the British Museum and the libraries of the University of the West Indies, the University of Guyana and the Institute of Jamaica.

I am conscious of many deficiencies in this book. Some of these arise from the difficulty of trying to see the West Indian novel in its social and cultural context while offering a critique in more or less pure literary terms. The decision to not do a series of chapters on individual authors has led to a number of writers not being discussed as much as was, perhaps, due. But the greatest sin has been one of omission: there is enough interesting relevant and related material left to justify the establishment of a School of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies.

I can only hope that the present work will play a useful part in the years ahead of discovery, evaluation and reorientation in the West Indies.

Introduction to 2004 Edition

The West Indian Novel and Its Background (henceforth *WINB*) was first published in 1970. It came out at just the right time. It was influential in the creation and internationalisation of an academic discipline called West Indian Literature, it stimulated the development of graduate studies in the English Department of the University of the West Indies and it was seminal in the transformation of the syllabus in 'English' at the University of the West Indies, (UWI).

When I arrived in Jamaica with the manuscript in 1968, the department had long ceased to hold the view that West Indians were not fit to teach English at the University of the West Indies, but the undergraduate syllabus was still a copy of the syllabus of an English provincial university, and there was little encouragement to pursue graduate work of any kind. Those who wondered whether West Indian Literature was good enough and sufficient in quantity to deserve a full one-year course were restrained by the fact that a highbrow publisher in England had contracted the book and the University of Edinburgh had granted the degree. It helped, too, that the person introducing the course had been lecturing in English at two British universities. Such are the uses of colonial adversity.

The establishment of the first full course in West Indian Literature at Mona in 1968 meant that there could be no official resistance at Cave Hill or St Augustine: a course on the books at any one campus was automatically eligible to be taught at the other two campuses. St Augustine followed two years later in 1970, and Cave Hill was not far behind. Thus did the department begin to move to what it is today – a Department of Literatures in English[1] whose core is the literature of the West Indies and whose research strengths[2] lie in West Indian literary studies.

In this introduction, I want to talk about how the book that is identified with these changes came to be written, and I want to compare its essential concerns and methodologies with current critical concerns and practices. As I reminisce, I recognise not only that the conditions under which scholars work have changed for the better but that these changed conditions are connected one way or the other, for better and for ill, with changes in the nature of the

enterprise. In offering a description of the making of the book, I find it impossible to avoid talking about moments in my own development.

****

Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer was a provoking book. V.S. Naipaul swore that he was getting out of Trinidad as soon as possible, and I confided to its secret pages (no one would enter there), that I would be Inter BA, BA, MA and at last PhD in West Indian Literature. This was in 1952, a few weeks after my beloved English teacher, Reverend Weldon Grant, read out to the class from Sam Selvon's novel, *A Brighter Sun*, the episode in which an old man called Sookdeo sells a blind donkey to an unsuspecting neighbour who had to use a cutlass to apply for a refund. The Canadian teacher read enthusiastically in some Saskatchewan version of Trinidad dialect but I recognised Sookdeo, his clothes, his voice, his gestures. I knew this old Indian man, and the slightest clue from the author was enough to make me see and hear and feel and smell the world to which he belonged. I knew only too well the social milieu Selvon was drawing upon, and I also saw him ennobling that world, giving shape to its body and making real the possibilities of transformation.

I have to confess that I did not stop enjoying English literature or other literatures on discovering Selvon (my father's salvage from the American base in our village which was closing down after the war included several boxes of Armed Services Editions of American books). Reading the literatures of other countries has never been for me an exercise of desperate fantasy. Some of the English and American books I read or started to read were null and void to me, and I realised later that I did not feel the landscape in the way I felt it while reading West Indian books. But with some of these half-sized American paperbacks I could feel the life of the main characters, recognise the basic situations and identify with certain emotions. At such moments, I could identify almost completely with the characters experiencing those emotions.

Incidentally, I take the point about colonialism and the daffodils, but when I read Wordsworth's poem, it reminded me of how I would be startled and how I would exult when I was struck as so often happened by the beauty of some aspect of my village – the poui trees flowering suicidally in pink and yellow before the coming of the rains, the breathtaking sight of the sea through the mighty cedars as the pirate taxi bringing me home from the prison of a poor people's boarding school broke around the last curve in the road. I knew

even then that Wordsworth's poem was not about daffodils but about seeing your landscape and about being in love or falling in love with it.

It wasn't desperate fantasy, but when I encountered West Indian Literature for the first time, the response was sensuous, immediate and instinctive. I could 'hear' and 'see' and 'feel' what was being represented realistically, and I could respond intuitively to things that were not being literally represented. (Not all exclusions are repressions or denials so I was not deconstructing or rewriting anybody's book.) With respect to social and cultural issues, I could pick up what Lionel Trilling calls 'the buzz of implication'.[3]

The boy in his teens was discovering that more of a literature's meanings are accessible to those who belong to the environment and community out of which the literature comes than to those who do not have such intimacy; and that a piece of writing is more evocative to those who belong to the language in which it is written than to those who do not so belong. The boy in his teens was discovering what Lamming set down in an article of 1958:[4] that the literature of his own country could help a person to know and understand the world of his feelings, the world of his social relations, the wide world of human beings to which he belonged, and that it could do so more comprehensively and sensuously than the literature of other countries.

I continued to enjoy other literatures for what they could give, but I needed the self-knowledge and the social and cultural confidence that I now knew could come out of the literature of the West Indies. I discovered Alfred Mendes and C.L.R. James and the short story writers of the 1930s and 1940s in Trinidad. These discoveries must have inspired chapter V 'The Drift Towards The Audience', which directed others to a still unexhausted field. I came upon John Hearne and Roger Mais among the books of Mr James Lee Wah who had graduated from the UWI in Jamaica and was teaching English at Naparima College. I discovered George Lamming, Phyllis Allfrey and Edgar Mittelholzer and found that since I belonged to Cayuna and San Cristobal, I belonged to the West Indies and the Caribbean.

I knew from those days that I wanted to read and own all the books written by West Indian authors, and I made up my mind that part of my life's work would be to spread the word that these books and writers existed, and to help people to enjoy them and learn from them. This led to *West Indian Narrative* (1966), an anthology for schools with photographs of the authors and a map to show the island from which each author came. The wish to steep myself in the literature and make it known to West Indians was one of the ruling motives behind *WINB*, and it remains a cardinal principle in my literary scholarship and criticism.

If, as a schoolboy, I was preparing unconsciously, I went into deliberate planning as an undergraduate at Edinburgh University. I was studying the major British authors for an undergraduate degree, but I had already made up my mind that I would be doing my PhD on the West Indian novel. I began reading 'Commonwealth Literature' (which was not being taught at universities then). Although 'Commonwealth Literature' was new and West Indian Literature was elusive, most of the books were available in the main university library and in the Scottish National Library, disposed according to then current classifications.

One of my tutors (a part-time lecturer) knew enough to give encouragement, and we pre-empted tutorial time to talk West Indian Literature. I liked her and felt I had found my supervisor. When the official time came, however, the rules declared that there was no one on the full-time teaching staff qualified to direct my research. The eventual supervisor, a newly-appointed lecturer, breezed in one day, introduced himself and said disarmingly,

> I don't know a thing about West Indian literature. The idiots probably gave me a job because they think African Literature and West Indian Literature are the same thing. I'll look at what you write and read the books you tell me to read. I'll be able to direct if you know what you are about.

I envied my good friend Eustace Palmer because resources for his research were so easily available and because he had a distinguished professor to supervise him. I plied him with the titles of African books and the names of the African authors my supervisor, Paul Edwards, was opening up to me. I knew that my friend would easily complete his thesis on the English novelist Henry Fielding and would then turn his attention to the writers from his continent.

In the British system you are given a supervisor and then they forget you until you are ready to submit. I could not have invented better conditions or dreamed up a more congenial supervisor than the late Paul Edwards. He beat me at squash, drank me under the table, laughed me out of solemnity and pedantry, offered the most cogent criticisms, turned on the most brilliant insights at unexpected times and places and knew too little about West Indian literature and too much about life to deter me from doing what I wanted to do. He was not an officer in any critical dispensation, tyrannising over graduate students who would only get jobs and be licensed to go out into the world if they conformed to the ideologies of a network of colluding graduate schools.

The thesis probably also benefited from the fact that I had not lived at home since 1959, and from the circumstance that there were no grants to travel to the islands. If I was out of touch with the daily dramas, I was away from the cliquism and the politics, and from the longed-for distractions of island life. There was no internet and no e-mail. All you had was memory and imagination, the indefatigable and prompt Andrew Salkey in London and the postal service to the West Indies. The patient and persistent Arthur Ravenscroft at Leeds did not know he was forcing me to keep up with the whole field of West Indian Literature and stay in touch with the other 'Commonwealth' literatures when he invited me to do the Annual Bibliography and survey of West Indian Literature for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature.*

Like the protagonist of the Walcott poem, I had 'a sound colonial education' (in my case, at a Presbyterian secondary school) and I can see now that knowledge of the Bible and literatures of countries other than my own were the source of an intertextual sense that didn't know it was doing anything revolutionary when it recognised the pointed tensions writers consciously or unconsciously explored between one text and another. It was an intertextual sense or comparative outlook, moreover, which was so subtle that it operated even when the dialogue between texts did not draw dramatic attention to itself. Those who read widely and live the books they read cannot help being intertextual in the most profound and unstressed senses of the word.

The Higher Degrees Committee at Edinburgh required that I achieve a reading knowledge of French and Spanish and ensured that I had access to distinguished historians George Shepperson, David Waddell and Christopher Fyffe. In those days, Edinburgh undergraduates in Literature did Linguistics for three of their four years and were taught by established professors as well as by new men in the field like M.A.K. Halliday, J.P. Thorne and J.M. Sinclair. This solid and inspiring foundation was crucial, but the fact remained that at Edinburgh I had no interaction with an intellectual community involved in the specifics of my culture and society. The existence of a West Indian student association at Edinburgh and the interaction of a Trinidadian person of Indian origin with young men and women from all the West Indian territories were sustaining and formative, but that did not remove the obligation to become my own historian, sociologist, economist and sociolinguist. I learnt to argue with myself.

As a person with 'a sound colonial education', I first needed to explain myself to myself and to see from a native's perspective the culture out of which my literature was forming. I would also have to make it easier for my

readers and examiners to understand. Removal from the site of the living action forced me to concentrate on the material I was laboriously gathering and helped me to keep scholarly distance. The first drafts of the thesis were written in cold remote sections of the university library and in paraffin-heated rooms. The books were the source of passion.

I find all of these personal circumstances reflected in the character of the work.

****

At the turn of the nineteenth century, some 50 years after the Emancipation Act and the beginnings of primary school education for nearly everyone, separate island nationalisms began to emerge in all the territories. Although these stirrings cannot be described as movements of the people, the spokesmen (mostly white or coloured) foresaw the coming power of 'our black countrymen', recognised the need to redefine their own roles and declared the imperative to create an integrated society. The formation of Literary and Debating Clubs in all the territories at about this time link the growth of literacy in English among the black population with the political stirrings. *WINB* used this moment as an indisputable starting point and focused on an outstanding illustration – the attempts of the white Jamaican, Thomas Henry MacDermot (1870-1933), editor of the *Jamaica Times*, to set up the 'All Jamaica Library' which issued five volumes between 1903 and 1909. (See pp. 51-55 of *WINB*).

Pre-twentieth century writings by Europeans and Americans, either set in or written about the West Indies, and some of the literary efforts of educated black people in the islands are documented in books like Wylie Sypher's seminal *Guinea's Captive Kings* (1942). I thought hard about the representations of black people and the language and cultural practices of black people in books and tracts like the ones cited by Sypher. But the attempt I was making to construct a history of the West Indian novel could not base itself on these writings. At the instigation of C.L.R. James, I had read the coloured/mulatto Michel Maxwell Philip's *Emmanuel Appadocca or a Blighted Life*, interesting for its race and colour concerns, its sea consciousness and its father-son theme. But it did not herald the birth of the West Indian or Trinidadian novel, and the two or three other books like it (some by non-West Indian authors) could not be used in any attempt to offer a basic defining account of the development of West Indian writing. I found it reasonable and convenient to think that the significance of the pre-twentieth century writings[5] would only emerge after