Origins of Pan-Africanism

Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora

Marika Sherwood

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This work is dedicated to my friend,
my colleague, my fellow historian
Glen Richards
who died in 2009 of sickle cell disease.
He told me he was looking forward to reading this book;
I wish I could send him a copy!

Photograph by] [*E. H. Mills.*

Mr. S. Williams.

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Introduction

Henry Sylvester Williams was a remarkable man. He lived at a time when race and social class were of fundamental significance to what anyone could expect to be able to achieve in life. With extraordinary determination and perseverance this Trinidadian son of an immigrant carpenter[1], became not only a qualified barrister, but the first Black man admitted to the Bar in Cape Town, one of the first two elected Black borough councillors in London, the author of a booklet, the publisher of a monthly magazine, the representative of various South and West African organisations, and the convenor of the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900.

Probably few expected this dark-skinned village boy, not from a wealthy background, to achieve more than the little education required in a British colony for a teaching qualification. But as a determined and ambitious young man Williams left for the US in 1891 to attempt to obtain further education. It was not an auspicious time to arrive there: there were 113 lynchings that year, and 162 in 1892.[2] Efforts to disenfranchise 'Negroes' continued. In 1895, the year Williams left for the UK, Booker T. Washington delivered his 'Atlanta Compromise' speech, asking for economic and educational support, in exchange for *not* demanding political and social equality.

We know virtually nothing about Williams' years in the US, or at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, except that he probably did not obtain any educational qualifications. What he did obtain was an introduction to the African American style of political activism, and to political activists.

On arrival in the UK, while contending with the British versions of racism, he constantly interrupted his training as a barrister to form the African Association which immediately embarked on political activities. Supported by resident Africans, Caribbeans and African Americans and Black Britons, the Association called the world's first Pan-African Conference. With speakers from all these areas, including two African American women, and support from some Whites and Indians, the Conference dealt with issues ranging from history, culture, racial discrimination and lack of power, to the demand for equal treatment and opportunities, and for full representation in government.

Many of those who attended were already, or became, involved in political activism. Some of the Africans who attended went on to form the National Congress of British West Africa while W. E. B. Du Bois organised four subsequent Pan-African Congresses. The 6th conference, held in Manchester in 1945, was organised by George Padmore, who had imbibed his pan-Africanism from his father, who had joined the Trinidad branch of the Pan-African Association in 1901.

The 1900 Conference was well-reported in the colonies and in the British media, which was almost flabbergasted by these erudite Black speakers. Maybe they weren't all 'uncivilised savages' after all!

After visiting the Caribbean to set up local Pan-African organisations, Williams completed his legal training in London and was admitted to the British Bar. For reasons unknown, perhaps because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient work as a Black barrister to support his English wife and their children, or perhaps because he had been so involved in the controversies regarding the Boer War and its consequences, Williams left for South Africa in 1903.

For a Black barrister in South Africa the situation was even worse than it probably had been in London. Seemingly getting little legal work, Williams became much involved in local 'Coloured' and African politics.[3] He returned to Britain after less than a year, but continued his work with these organisations in London.

Back in the unwelcoming 'Mother Country', Williams tried again to build up a legal practice and joined or worked with many organisations, but could not resuscitate the Pan-African Association. He hoped to become a Parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Party, in order to represent and advocate the rights of 'his people'. He was elected as a Liberal borough councillor, briefly visited Liberia, and then returned to Trinidad. Why he chose to return we do not know: Could the situation in Britain for Blacks have looked too hopeless to him? Had he had enough of the many forms of racial discrimination? Was he disappointed in the new Liberal government and its policies towards African colonies? We have to presume that Williams believed that in Trinidad he would be able to earn enough as a barrister to support his growing family

But, if life had been uncomfortable for his wife Agnes in London, did she foresee—did her husband warn her—that though there were huge cultural differences, her life as a White woman married to a Black man might not be easy in Trinidad either?

On his home island Williams set up a law practice, and had begun to get involved in local political activities when he collapsed with chronic nephritis, which is the slow, gradual destruction of the kidneys. He had been home a little over two years. Within a few weeks Henry Sylvester Williams was dead, aged 44.

There is no attempt in this book to 'interpret' Henry Sylvester Williams, or Agnes. But the racial, social and political context in which they lived is

fully explored as without these we cannot understand the magnitude of his accomplishments. Or hers.

Williams has been virtually written out of history. This oblivion can be partly attributed to W. E. B. Du Bois, who barely acknowledged in all his writings that his initial excursion into Pan-Africanism was at the world's first Pan-African gathering organised in London by an unknown, unqualified Williams.[4] It is time to restore Henry Sylvester Williams to his rightful place in Black struggles for equality and in the history of Pan-Africanism.

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The innumerable others who helped are thanked in the footnotes.

1 Trinidad
From Childhood to Teaching

In 1860 the North American journalist and campaigner William G. Sewell travelled through the British colonies in the Caribbean and described Trinidad as 'forest-covered from mountain-top to water's edge, its luxuriant and gigantic vegetation rich with coloring that eternal summer alone can give. . . . Except at the Naparimas, where the principal sugar plantations are situated. . . . Trinidad has the appearance of a wild, unreclaimed country, broken up with savannas. . . . Port-of-Spain, the principal town, [has] more life and business activity than in any British Antillean town that I have seen. . . . The streets are wide [and] well laid out . . . there is an immense savanna or park reserved for the recreation of the people . . . with only a present population of 70,000 or 80,000 souls, Trinidad can sustain a million.'[1] The village of Arouca was some twelve miles along an unpaved road going east from Port-of-Spain to the larger settlements of Arima and Sangre Grande. According to missionary Edward Underhill travelling one year later, Arouca was a 'village of some extent, surrounded by sugar estates. The houses of the Coolies are ranged along the roads of the estates, or near the mill yards and are generally superior to those inhabited by the common Creole negro.'[2]

THE COSMOPOLITAN POPULATION OF TRINIDAD

By the papal decree of 1493 the entire Western Hemisphere was allotted to Spain while south and south-east Asia were given to Portugal. The indigenous populations were ignored, as if they did not exist. Cristoforo Columbo first sighted the island he named Trinidad in 1498, but it was not till 1530 that a Spanish governor, Antonio Sedeno, was appointed. The island's indigenous population, agriculturalists and fishermen, who tried to resist the Spanish encroachment on their lands, were almost exterminated by the Spaniards through warfare, enslavement, disease and transportation. The island languished, not having deposits of the gold and silver the

Spaniards sought. Some tobacco was grown, but little else until the early 18th century when there was a short-lived attempt to grow cocoa.

The colony's fortunes changed when a French planter from Grenada, after visiting Trinidad, submitted to the King of France a proposal for the development of the island. The French and Spanish kings reached an agreement in 1783, which permitted French immigration, including free people of colour. Many of the settlers were planters wishing to relocate to virgin lands from the exhausted soil of the long-settled French West Indian colonies. A provision within the *cedula* permitted the importation of enslaved Africans free of taxes for ten years from 1785. By 1797 profitable quantities of sugar, coffee, cocoa and cotton were exported from the island.

It was in that year that in the course of the war between Spain and Britain, the British captured Trinidad without having to fire a shot, the Spanish defences being almost non-existent. Britain thus acquired a new Caribbean possession of 10,009 enslaved Africans, 2,086 Whites of Spanish, but mainly French descent; 4,466 free people of colour, and 1,082 Native Americans. A governor was appointed and the Crown Colony system of government instituted in 1810, as this was thought by Great Britain to be the best method of anglicising the heterogeneous and multilingual population. Agitation by the planters against this direct rule by Britain resulted in the granting of some measure of representation in the councils advising the government. These representatives were chosen by the governor from the principal planters, but he retained the casting vote.[3]

The British government encouraged emigration from Britain, Europe and other British possessions. Some German migrants settled on the Arouca savannah. Planters arrived with their slaves from Barbados and the Leeward and Windward islands. By 1808 there were 21,806 enslaved people of African descent in Trinidad. Though Britain had banned the trade in slaves in 1807, enslaved Africans continued to be brought into Trinidad (and undoubtedly sold) under the guise of 'domestic servants'.[4]

However, the continuing arrival of such slaves and the undoubted smuggling of human cargo did not satisfy the insatiable appetite of plantations for labour. In 1806 Chinese labourers began to be imported. The labour crisis exploded in the period 1833–1838, that is, between the proclamation of the emancipation of slaves and the ending of the subsequent period of 'apprenticeship'. The descendants of Africans were offered no compensation or means to begin life as free people, while some £20 million (well over £1.6 billion today) was set aside by the British government to pay compensation to the planters for the loss of their enslaved, unpaid labour. Sewell was astonished at the utter disregard of the first principles of economical science displayed by the West India planters:

> They do not seem to reflect for a moment that the interest of a proprietor is to elevate, not to degrade, his labourer. They have misjudged the negro throughout, and have put too much faith is his supposed

> inferiority. After the important step of emancipation was taken, little was done to turn emancipation to the best account. . . . Instead of endeavoring by liberal terms to induce the laborers to remain on the estates, they commenced a system shortly after emancipation of giving less wages and exacting more work.[5]

Not surprisingly, the newly freed people had little desire to continue working on plantations. Edward Underhill probably understood the situation quite well when he visited a 'small property of a few acres, the possession of a black man; one of the few who have commenced cultivation of the sugar cane on their own account. . . . Generally, small cultivators are discouraged by the planters who are said to be reluctant to buy their canes. . . . The Creole negroes generally refuse to become servants on the plantations, or to bind themselves by any permanent engagement; any kind of obligation which limits their independence is avoided [but] they will readily work as contractors.[6]

Immigrants from the smaller islands also began to arrive. How many is unknown, as the government kept no records of such arrivals. For example, the Williams family probably emigrated because in densely settled Barbados there had been no free land available for emancipated slaves to settle on. The planters there had also instituted rigorous laws to keep their freed labour on the plantations—and to keep them docile. Not surprisingly many Bajans sought to make better lives for themselves on the mainland or on other islands where more opportunities were available.[7]

Searching for a cheap labour force the planters found a new source: indentured workers from India. Between 1838 and 1917 when the system was ended after protests by the Indian government, some 145,000 Indians were imported. Displacing those of African descent, they did the same work on the plantations, often under Black supervisors, under draconian laws, minimal wages and horrendous living conditions, often housed in the huts that had been erected for the enslaved. Nevertheless, freedom at the end of their fixed period of indenture, with either a free voyage home (only about 25% returned to India) or the grant of some land, put the Indians in a more advantageous position than what the slaves had endured. Moreover, the Indians were deemed to be human beings, a recognition often withheld from enslaved Africans. As the government of Trinidad bore much of the cost of indenture, many Blacks objected to the scheme as being simply an aid-package for the already wealthy. They also claimed that the importation of indentured labour lowered wage rates.

Not unnaturally this situation resulted in a degree of animosity between those of African descent and the Indians.[8] This suited the White ruling class, which fostered the division between the two groups, for example by encouraging the formation of self-sufficient communities of estate labourers.

Another source of labour were the so-called 'Liberated Africans'. These were men freed by the British anti-slave trade squadrons from slaving vessels captured in West African and Cuban waters. The men were either

'apprenticed' to the settlers in Sierra Leone; inducted into the West Indian Regiment stationed in Sierra Leone and subsequently at least partially settled in the West Indies; or sent directly as indentured labour to the Caribbean colonies. By 1867, when the system was abolished, 8,854 Africans had been imported into Trinidad. Some Yoruba thus imported settled in Arouca. There was also a small African American population, as some of those who had fought for the British in the War of 1812 had also been induced to settle in Trinidad.[9] Thus by the 1860s Trinidad had been the host to many newcomers, thus becoming probably the most cosmopolitan of Britain's West Indian territories.

In social class terms, Whites were at the top of a tall pyramid; mixed-race (termed 'coloured') people were in the middle rank with Indians, Blacks and Chinese below them, according to sociologist Lloyd Braithwaite. The relationship between Whites and Coloureds was more akin to a 'caste' system than to British-style social class. The caste barrier could be circumvented by marriage, but inter-racial couples did not meet with general acceptance. The only route out of the lowest class for those with dark skin was the 'occupational ladder . . . a dark skinned doctor or lawyer would seek to obtain entry into a higher status group by marrying a light skinned person'. This often happened while the ambitious man was studying abroad.[10]

EDUCATION IN TRINIDAD

Elementary education, generally with untrained teachers, had been instituted by the churches. In order to speed the process of the Anglicisation of the heterogeneous population, from 1870 the government began to finance, via ward rates, elementary schools for children aged 5 to 15. Though some Indian children attended 'ward' schools, most were enrolled in the schools specially started for them by Canadian Presbyterian missionaries. By 1875 there were 49 government schools, but there was no requirement for teachers to be trained or licensed. Pupils had to pay a weekly fee, which naturally deterred many children from attending, or attending regularly. For example in 1886 the total number enrolled was 14,527 and average attendance was 9,933. As the population of school-age children was c.22,500, this meant that only 44% of children were in school on any one day.[11]

Examinations for teacher certification were introduced in about 1870, and could be taken without attending classes at Woodbrook, the government teacher training institution. Established in 1852, Woodbrook was associated with two 'Model' elementary schools, which, because they offered a 'superior' education, could charge a higher fee of $1 per week. This fee excluded most Black children. The education teacher trainees received at Woodbrook was minimal. There was no professional training and the trainees were little more than cheap, if supervised, labour at the two Model schools.

There were two boys' secondary schools in the colony, catering almost exclusively to White children. Queen's Royal College (QRC), started in

1859, was a non-denominational day school, and an important part of the Anglicisation process. Its fees were high—$96 per annum in 1869; it excluded illegitimate Black (but not White) children; offered two scholarships per annum; provided a classical education, and entered boys for the external Cambridge examinations. In 1869 there were 13 Black children enrolled and 55 Whites. Roman Catholic Queen Mary's College was started in 1863 by the Holy Ghost fathers to counter the secular education (and Anglicisation) provided by QRC. As it had lower fees and offered classical and commercial courses, it attracted a wider social spectrum of students. Girls could attend the Roman Catholic St. Joseph Convent.[12]

Beginning in 1870, two 'island scholarships' were offered for university education in the UK.

HENRY SYLVESTER WILLIAMS' CHILDHOOD

Henry Sylvester Williams was not born on 19 February 1869 in Arouca, as reported by previous biographers.[13] Ronald Noel has located the registration of his birth, dated 24 March 1867, in Barbados. He was the eldest son of Henry Bishop and Elizabeth Williams, who emigrated to Trinidad from Barbados at an unknown date.[14] Henry Bishop Williams was a wheelwright; as a skilled workman, he probably encountered relatively few problems in earning a living. Besides Henry junior, five more children were born to the Williamses, three girls and two boys.[15]

Young Henry Sylvester Williams grew up in a village where the majority were of African descent, and included Africans with memories of Africa. Arouca was surrounded by large estates owned mainly by English-speakers and worked mainly by Indians; there was also a long-resident, French Creole speaking Black population in the village. Thus Henry would have heard at least four languages in his childhood: English, French Creole, Hindi (the Bojpuri dialect), and of the African languages, probably Yoruba; and witnessed three forms of religious practice, though the only places of worship were the three competing Christian sects, the Church of England, the Roman Catholics and the Presbyterians. The latter two had their own elementary schools; there was also a government school, which was attended by the Williams children. The Williams household was English-speaking and belonged to the local Church of England. Did the Williams family escape imbibing the European attitudes towards Africans as irredeemably savage unless civilised by Europeans?

Education

What sort of education did Williams receive? A very limited one: barely an introduction to the 'Three Rs': reading, writing and 'rithmetic, at his village primary school. On completing his elementary education, in 1884 young Henry, probably 17 years old, took up residence in the reformed, relocated and

renamed teacher training institution, Tranquillity, which now offered boarding facilities.[16] Williams was one of the seven boarders at Tranquillity while Prince Kofi Intim, the son of the deposed King of the Asante, was staying with the superintendent.[17] Thus Williams was fortunate in not only having lived and undoubtedly met the Yoruba residents of Arouca, but could now meet and converse with an Asante (albeit exiled) prince from the Gold Coast.

James Collens, the superintendent, was an Englishman, and thus part of the British official/merchant half of the linguistic/ethnic/social class division among the Whites: The other half, the planters, were mainly Francophone. According to historian Bridget Brereton, Collens was 'later Inspector of Schools . . . deeply involved in the social and cultural activities of the Port of Spain upper and middle classes . . . and the local leader of the Temperance Movement. . . . He listed among the characteristics of the blacks invincible laziness, outward devotion and piety combined with superstitious belief . . . sexual immorality, dishonesty, lack of thrift and ambition, and a tendency to steal.'[18] Thus Williams had to learn to deal with the prejudices of Englishmen very early in his professional life. However, Collens' introduction to the Temperance movement was to prove very useful to Williams in Britain some years later.

In 1886 Williams was one of seven (out of 21 female and male candidates) who passed the examinations for the Class III Teacher's Certificates. The improved syllabus included reading, dictation, grammar, geography, arithmetic and algebra, a long poem by Milton, school management, and, of course, the outlines of English history. He had been a talented pupil at Tranquillity as his name appeared in the school prize list for both 1884 and 1885, when he was awarded an additional prize 'for the highest number of marks'.[19]

Working as a Teacher

Williams took up his post as a probationary Assistant Teacher in 1887. (It is noted that he was also deemed competent to teach singing.) There is no record of his taking the Second Class examinations when he became eligible, in 1889. (After another seven years' service, he would have been granted a First Class Certificate, with a maximum salary of $480 or £Stg.100.)[20] The syllabus he was required to teach was, in the words of J. J. Thomas 'a servile imitation of the now almost entirely exploded English fashions of instruction . . . in many particulars hopelessly inapplicable to the training of children of the tropics'. Instead of being taught about the classical world, children should be taught West Indian history and geography, he advocated.[21]

Williams taught at Eastern Boys' School in Port-of-Spain in 1887. In 1888 the *Trinidad Almanack* shows him as teaching at the San Fernando county government school near the La Fortunée and Bien Venue plantations; his school had an enrolment of 146, with an average daily attendance of 55.[22] It is probable that most of his pupils were the children of Indian workers from the estates.

In 1889 Williams was moved to Canaan, somewhat nearer to San Fernando; it was another estate village, but one with a bad reputation. This

was a much smaller school; the average daily attendance was 35. The Warden, the chief government official of the county of San Fernando, was either well-pleased with Williams, or could find no-one else with the skills required, as he appointed the young teacher as registrar of births and deaths for the Lagoon district.

The following year Williams was appointed to the San Juan Boys' Elementary School, which had 95 pupils. There was also a Girls' Elementary School, which took 110 girls and 32 boys. The records do not indicate at which of these schools Williams taught.[23] Again this was in a rural area, but much nearer to both Port-of-Spain and to his family in Arouca. Though the population was mainly French Creole-speaking, Williams was clearly a much-appreciated teacher. The weekly newspaper *Public Opinion* (13 August 1889) praised him for the program he had organised for prize-giving day, and advocated that

> Long may the present master continue to merit the praise and well wishes of the inhabitants and may the Government recognise in Mr. Williams the great benefit to the masses where there is the right man in the right place.[24]

Having been a boarder at Tranquillity at an opportune period while Prince Kofi was a 'guest' there, Williams had been at the La Fortunée/Bien Venue school at an equally providential moment. During his one year there a Black clergyman was installed at St. Clement's Chapel, only a few miles from the Bien Venue Estate. The Reverend Philip Douglin had served for 17 years as a missionary in West Africa at the Rio Pongas Mission, which was usually staffed by West Indians trained at Codrington College in Barbados. Douglin, who had been ordained in 1873 in Sierra Leone, was appointed vicar to St. Clement's in 1887.[25] He well might have become a friend of J. J. Thomas, who quoted him in his *Froudacity* as having said:

> In spite of the proud, supercilious, and dictatorial bearing of their teachers . . . in spite of the spirit of dependence and servility engendered by slavery, not only have individual members of the race entered into all the offices of dignity in Church and state, as subalterns—but they have attained to the very highest places. Here in the West Indies, and on the West Coast of Africa, are to be found Surgeons of the Negro Race, Solicitors, Barristers, Mayors, Councillors, Principals and Founders of High Schools and Colleges, Editors and Proprietors of Newspapers, Archdeacons, Bishops, Judges and Authors—men who not only teach those immediately around them, but also teach the world.[26]

Not surprisingly, shortly after arriving in Trinidad Douglin became involved in local Black politics, and may thus have been instrumental in introducing Williams to some of the political figures of the day—and of influencing the development of the paths he was to take through life.

Why did Williams decide to become a teacher? Was he among those described by historian Carl Campbell as 'black and coloured teachers, especially the headteachers (that is, those with Grade III Certificates and above) were among the most ambitious and enterprising of the descendants of slaves'.[27] Blacks' position in the social hierarchy came after the Whites and the people of colour; Indians and Chinese were at the bottom. Each layer had its own social divisions, which would have meant that Williams' father, a craftsman, would have been just below the few professional Blacks.[28] However, he would not have earned enough to pay the fees at the secondary schools, and Williams had not won (or sat for?) an 'exhibition' to one of these schools. Thus his only option for moving into the Black professional class was to train as a teacher.[29] As a professional he would have had access to others of his social class, including those politically active.

BLACK POLITICS IN TRINIDAD TOWARDS THE CLOSE OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Trinidad was a Crown Colony, ruled by the governor, who presided over an appointed Legislative Council (introduced in 1831), whose inevitably White members consisted of government officers and 'unofficials' chosen from the ranks of planters and large merchants by the governor.

Active and vociferous Black people[30] and their newspapers took up various struggles: for example, regarding the non-appointment of Blacks to even middle-ranking positions in the Civil Service; the obstacles placed in the path of Blacks trying to acquire land; the fees charged in elementary schools, and the racially prejudiced attitudes of almost all Whites towards Blacks.[31] William Herbert of the *Trinidad Chronicle* urged his readers to 'strive by every legal and constitutional means to secure your rights'. He also warned his (Black) readers about their 'want of cohesion, the absence of concerted action among you'.[32] Many Black editors advised their readers to take pride in their race and their African heritage.

One of the earliest activists was George Numa Dessource, an immigrant from Santo Domingo. From 1848 Dessource used his newspaper, *The Trinidadian*, to attack conditions on the island and the lack of support offered by the government to the recently freed Blacks. Dessource was among those who surrounded and stoned Government House in protest at an Ordinance to compel Black prisoners, but not others, to shave their heads. The governor called out the troops and three people were killed. When gold was discovered in Venezuela, Dessource advocated emigration, painting Venezuela as an El Dorado compared to the social and economic inequalities of the British West Indies. Sadly, the reality was not utopian and many emigrants returned to Trinidad and other island homes.[33]

Petitions for at least a semi-representative government were sent to the Colonial Office and were invariably turned down.[34] Naturally, educated

Black people were also part of this call for a move towards democracy. For example, H.A. Alcazar, who had studied law in London on an island scholarship, was one of 69 people who in 1887 asked the Mayor of Port-of-Spain to call a public meeting to press for members of the Legislative Council to be elected, not appointed. (Mayors had been elected since 1867; the franchise was based on property and high income qualifications.) This campaign had been started in 1884 by a French Creole, Philip Rostant, in his newspaper *Public Opinion*. There were between five and ten thousand people at the subsequent meeting in Savannah Queen's Park. Thousands signed the Reform Petition which called for a Royal Commission on Constitutional change.[35] This resulted in a Franchise Commission, whose hostile report led to a temporary loss of support for the campaign. It should be noted here that none of the campaigners asked for a full franchise, or for independence, and only attacked certain aspects of Crown Colony government, not British rule *per se*.

There were two major events in the late 1880s which fostered pride and probably nurtured political action among Black Trinidadians. One was the publication of J. J. Thomas' *Froudacity* in London in 1889. The book was a response to the affirmation of English superiority in another publication, *The English in the West Indies*, by J. A. Froude, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University. The first copies of the book reached the Caribbean in about April 1888. Thomas, now retired from teaching and recuperating from 'rheumatic paralysis' in Grenada, immediately set to work to prepare his answers. These began to appear as a series of articles in *The St. George's Chronicle and Grenada Gazette*. The 15 articles proved to be the first draft of *Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained*, which Thomas now journeyed to London to complete. It was published in about July–August 1889, a subscription raised in the Caribbean insuring the publisher against his forecast losses. Sadly, Thomas died in September, before he could complete work on the second edition of his 1869 book *Creole Grammar*. *Froudacity* is a page by page, sometimes line by line refutation of Froude's racist statements, and the corrections of historical inaccuracies in this supremacist tome.

The second event concerned the disagreement over the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Emancipation. Some prominent Blacks thought their slave ancestry should be forgotten, if not hidden. One of the leaders of the faction demanding that the anniversary should be not only celebrated but declared a public holiday, was Edgar Maresse-Smith, of French free 'coloured' settler origins. He was strongly supported by Samuel Carter in his *San Fernando Gazette*. Maresse-Smith had become a solicitor through the articled clerkship route. He worked for all strata of society including the poor, and had been J. J. Thomas' amanuensis when the older man's eyesight had begun to fail. A vocal advocate of racial pride and critic of racial inequalities, he headed the Trinidad Literary Association and was active in the movement demanding constitutional change and greater accountability

by government. Maresse-Smith's demand for a celebration, formulated at a public meeting on 18 June 1888, met strong opposition and the Governor refused to grant a holiday. Maresse-Smith refused to accept the government's *diktat*: at another public meeting he formed a committee called Friends of Freedom, which organised a huge banquet and divine services in the various denominational churches. These included a widely reported sermon by Revd. Douglin at St. Clement's, as well as public celebrations. In the words of his biographer, Maresse-Smith was at the 'forefront of the drive for intercourse and unity of purpose, based on racial pride and consciousness'.[36] Simultaneously, Samuel Carter commissioned a series of articles called 'Ethiopia's children in the British West Indies', which were published in the *Gazette* beginning on 7 July.[37]

Among those working with Maresse-Smith for Emancipation anniversary celebrations was Emmanuel M'Zumbo Lazare, whose African-born parents had migrated to Trinidad from Guadeloupe. Also a solicitor, he was another campaigner for constitutional change and for the racial pride required as a precursor to mobilisation for social change. Both men—as other political activists—opposed Crown Colony government, but not the Empire; they remained loyal and proud of the 'motherland'.

Did Williams participate in the Emancipation celebrations at Arouca? 'According to the *Public Opinion* of 7 August, bands of music began parading through the streets during the evening of 31 July. They serenaded the inhabitants throughout the night. Daybreak "was heralded by the discharge of guns from several places". Tolerance for the proceedings probably indicates music of "gentility".' In Chatham there was a ball, and in Mayaro a 'drumdance' with a ball the following day.[38]

As Douglin, Maresse-Smith and Lazare were all to be associated with Williams in the future, we can probably presume that they had met, perhaps at one of these public meetings, at the Emancipation dinner, or perhaps at one of the many debating society or Literary Association meetings frequented by the Black middle class.

While we have no evidence of Williams' involvement with the clubs or reform movements, we do know that he attended the meeting called under the aegis of the Tranquillity superintendent in June 1889 to discuss the necessity of establishing a teachers' association. He was not a member of the committee formed to frame the constitution and rules, but attended the inaugural meeting of the Trinidad Elementary Teachers' Union held in January 1890.

However, Williams was not to play a role in future developments in Trinidad. For reasons unknown, he decided to leave Trinidad, probably in 1891.According to a previous biographer, in a scrapbook shown to him by Williams' daughter, there is a subscription list dated 10 July, in aid of his departure for 'America and England'.[39] Whether he had accumulated enough savings from his probable salary of £Stg60 per annum (the maximum for a Class III teacher), or if he worked his way on a boat going North is not known.

What did he take with him? He had gained much experience in the schools of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious cosmopolitan world of Trinidad in the 1880s. Certainly he would have gained the self-assurance that must have come from his success as a teacher, and his move into the professional classes. In his last years of teaching, he had lived close enough to Port-of-Spain to have attended the political meetings taking place there, as well as cultural events, and the intellectual controversies at the debating societies. Though his formal education was limited, if he read the Black newspapers, his political education would have begun. Had he read Thomas' *Froudacity*? If he had, were the following lines influential in his later thinking and activism?

> Will these men [the extra-African ten millions in the Western Hemisphere] remain forever too poor, too isolated from one another for grand racial combinations? Or will the naturally opulent cradle of their people, too long a prey to violence and unholy greed, become at length the sacred watchword of a generation willing and able to conquer or perish under its inspiration?[40]

2 Somewhere in North America, 1891–1896

It is not known how, where or when Henry Sylvester Williams arrived in North America.[1] Nor do we know why he decided to go there. Emigration from the English-speaking West Indies to the US was not common at this time. Annual figures, until 1903 when they began to escalate, were around a hundred.[2] However, emigration to Britain, the 'Mother Country', superficially a more likely destination, would have been even more uncommon, except for students bound for the universities. Such students would have been in receipt of scholarships, or of private funding as there was no tradition in Britain of students working their way through their undergraduate degrees. Nor was there a tradition of immigration from the Caribbean, though over the centuries many people from Britain's West Indian 'possessions' had settled in the 'Mother Country'. In the earlier period, some were brought in as household slaves and then as servants by returning planters and ship's captains; others arrived as seamen or possibly in British regiments which had served in the West Indies. Later, probably from the 19th century, Blacks came as merchants, or simply to improve their prospects; some civil servants retired in Britain and some professionals, once qualified, preferred to practise in Britain rather than in the colonies.[3] Did Williams hope to earn enough in the US to accumulate sufficient funds for an English university education? Or to train as a barrister? As there is no record of his having attended an educational institution in the US, but as he did briefly attend a British university, we have to presume that he saw his future as lying not in the US but in Britain and its empire/commonwealth.

WILLIAMS IN THE US

Where was Williams in the years 1891 to 1893, and from 1894 until he left for Britain in 1896?

Williams' son, interviewed by J. R. Hooker in Trinidad in 1969, recalled that his father had told him that he had had to do menial work in the US.[4] This is quite possible, as his Trinidad education and teaching experience would not have been accepted as sufficient for employment as a teacher.

Did he perhaps also work on the railways? This possibility arises from a statement he had made to journalists at *The Marylebone Mercury and West London Gazette* in 1906 (17/11/1906, p.5), on his election as a councillor in that London borough. He stated that he had 'travelled through Canada and the United States'.[5]

Not attending an education institution in the US does not, however, mean that Williams did not continue his education by attending political gatherings, as he had done in Trinidad. In fact, we have some tangential evidence that he had done so. Evidence which we can use as an indication of his involvements.

This evidence is from five sources, each of which indicates that Williams might have met some of the outstanding political figures in the US in the 1890s. The first is from the introductory paragraph by Bishop Alexander Walters to chapter twenty in his autobiography. The Bishop, reporting on the Pan-African Conference of 1900, wrote that the 'convocation' had been the idea of 'Mr. H. Sylvester Williams', who had 'presented his plan by letter to a number of distinguished Negroes in different countries, and after a favourable reply from them, he issued the call in the early part of 1900'.[6] This indicates that Williams might have heard these 'distinguished Negroes' speak and might well have met some of them. That Walters became the chairperson of the Conference not only indicates prior acquaintance but also Walters' trust in Williams.

The second piece of evidence is from the letterhead paper of the African Association, set up by Williams in London in 1897. Among the three 'patrons' listed is D. Augustus Straker. It seems relatively safe to presume that Williams must have known Straker, and that Straker had confidence in him in order to feel he could accept becoming a patron of the newly formed association.[7] That Bishop James Holly was named the Secretary for 'Hayti' at the Pan-African Conference is the third piece of evidence. As Holly was not at the Conference, we can assume fairly safely that Williams had either met him or read some of his work. Holly's biographer David Dean states that Holly had been among those African Americans to whom Williams sent a circular in 1899 to arouse interest in the plans of the African Association he had formed in London in 1897, so we can assume some form of acquaintanceship.[8]

It seems that Williams had also met T. Thomas Fortune, the editor of *The New York Age*, a weekly 'Afro-American journal of news and opinion'. This is evidenced by an editorial in the paper on 22 March 1906, p.2, which stated:

> Some ten years ago Mr Fortune suggested that the time was ripe for a congress, out of which might be evolved an association of the Africans and the descendants of Africa, from all parts of the world. A West Indian residing in New York at the time the suggestion was made seized upon it and after a while issued a call for such a Congress. . . .

This indicates, whether Mr. Fortune's memory served him correctly or not, that Williams was present at some meeting, probably in New York, in 1895–1896 when Mr. Fortune believes he made some such suggestion.

The final piece of evidence is a little less secure. In 1898 Williams wrote to Booker T. Washington to inform him of the existence of the African Association, and to solicit his co-operation and membership. Williams conferred with Washington during the latter's visit to London in July 1899 and Washington endorsed the idea for the Conference. While there could have been few politically aware Black people who had not heard of Booker T. Washington, would a man of such eminence have met with Williams exclusively on the basis of information he had received on the African Association? Or had someone perhaps recommended to him that he should meet with Williams—that is, if they had not already met while Williams was in the US?

INFLUENCES ON WILLIAMS?

In order therefore, to understand Williams' intellectual development and to acknowledge what an outstanding young man he must have been to have received recognition—and trust—from these older, more experienced men, we have to look at relevant aspects of their careers, mainly prior to Williams' arrival in the US, and while he was there. But first we should look at the state of Black America at the time of Williams' arrival.

The Political and Economic Situation of African Americans

In the words of D. E. Tobias, one of the African Americans who attended the Pan-African Conference in 1900, Negroes were 'free but not freed'.[9] Though Tobias was specifically referring to the iniquitous convict-labour system, the phrase is probably applicable to most Blacks in the southern states, who comprised some 89% of the US' population of African descent. The Civil War had certainly resulted in the abolition of slavery, but as southern Blacks were given no compensation, no '40 acres and a mule', their post-war situation generally remained dire, despite the efforts of the federal government's Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau tried but failed to bring in reasonable labour contracts, and to supply sufficient educational facilities. The right to vote, supposedly guaranteed by the 15th Amendment to the Constitution only resulted in Black enfranchisement and representation until the Ku Klux Klan and other armed terrorist organisations succeeded in physically preventing Blacks from voting. Hundreds were lynched and murdered—some while attempting to vote. This, coupled with the federal government's restoration of the franchise to those Confederates who had been deprived of this 'right' during Reconstruction, and the massive and various electoral frauds, resulted in the negrophobic Democratic

Party regaining or retaining control of most southern states. To retain the presidency, Rutherford Hayes, the Republican candidate in 1876 offered to withdraw all Negro troops from the South and promised a massive injection of financial aid. He won. In 1883 the Supreme Court ruled that the 14th Amendment prohibited discrimination by states but not by individuals. But states found many ways around this ruling. By 1885 most southern state legislatures had segregated schools, outlawed miscegenation, imposed segregation in public places, including public transport, and put in place poll-tax, property-owning or other qualifications for voters.[10] Thus the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which stated that 'the right to vote . . . shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude', was abrogated in a variety of ways.

Many southern Blacks migrated to the cities especially in the North in order to avoid grossly underpaid and over-regulated plantation labour.[11] However, in the cities they were just as exploited. In the North they were in competition with equally poor immigrant labour; moreover, as most labour unions refused membership to Blacks, many had to acquiesce to being hired at below union rates or as strike-breakers.[12] Naturally, relations between Black and White labour deteriorated. By 1893, in order to attract more labour organisations, the American Federation of Labour reneged on its previous refusal of membership to unions which practised racial exclusion by only demanding no *open* exclusion in union constitutions. In the South, the influence of Republican northern capitalists, who had lost interest in (improving) the condition of Blacks, was soon paramount. They were quick to seize the opportunities offered by cheap labour and unregulated conditions in the South. Wages were kept to a barely liveable minimum in the old and the new industries.

Nevertheless, some southern Blacks managed to get some education. The schools set up by the Freedmen's Bureau were replaced by aid from religious organisations which ran not only schools but set up colleges. The first of these was Livingstone College, set up by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church in North Carolina in 1879; Allen University was set up in 1881 by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Columbia, South Carolina; Morris Brown College in Atlanta followed in 1885. Thus, though even by 1890 only some 33% of Blacks aged 5 to 20 were enrolled in school and the illiteracy rate was 61%, a new, educated middle class was slowly formed in the South, to match the longer established group in the North.[13]

The political interest of the free Black middle class in the North was initially emancipation, then political equality. Though they claimed to represent all Blacks at their conventions, they were in fact influenced by White notions of middle class respectability and often looked down on lower-class Blacks. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that 'the way to alleviate "the present friction" between Whites and Blacks was to correct the

"immorality, crime and laziness among the Negroes themselves"'. [14] Even the radical T. Thomas Fortune homogenised Blacks, that is, 'the colored people' of the South, as 'naturally sociable, intensely religious, musical . . . humorous and generous to a fault'.[15]

Middle class Blacks continued to accept patronage positions from federal and local governments. The concern of lower-class Blacks in both the North and the 'freed' South was with earning a livelihood or obtaining land in order to live as free farmers. When land was not distributed southern Blacks joined their northern brethren in demands for education. Notions of the necessity of self-help proliferated once it became obvious that the Republican Party, supposedly on 'their' side, was not going to do anything further to aid the emancipated peoples.[16] Booker T. Washington, the most famous propagator of this idea, argued that economic participation was a more important source of power and status than political participation. The Democratic Party, the party of the Confederates, with few exceptions, continued its negrophobic stance. Thus, by the time of Williams' arrival, Blacks had nowhere to turn, but to themselves.[17]

Among the first men to realise this, apart from those who advocated various schemes of emigration, was the influential publisher/journalist T. Thomas Fortune, who advocated that Blacks should distance themselves from both political parties. Some turned towards philosophies of 'racial uplift' for both Negroes and Africans, on the basis that 'the Negro will never be anything here while Africa is shrouded in heathen darkness'.[18] Problems became so pressing that two rival groups organised national conventions in 1890. The first, called by Fortune's Afro-American League, is described below. The second resulted in the formation of the Equal Rights Association. Internal disagreements paralysed both bodies.

Black women who had begun to form their own associations in the first decades of the 19th century, came together in the early 1890s to organise the National Association of Colored Women, which aimed to foster unity among Black women, to work against lynching, and to promote temperance, morality and higher/industrial education. Though advocating the 'upbuilding, ennobling and advancement' of the whole 'race', these women, like their menfolk, were also imbued with the bourgeois spirit, desiring to 'awaken the women of the race to the great need of systematic effort in home-making and the divinely imposed duties of motherhood'.[19]

There was at this time what historian August Meier called 'the ethnic dualism of American Negroes'. This he defined as the conflict between ethnocentrism and identification with American nationality. The extreme forms of ethnocentrism were the formation of all-Negro communities, and emigration/colonization. However, at the time of Williams' arrival, ethnic pluralism was more popular—that is, the advocacy that Blacks should remain a separate group within American society, but enjoy equal rights as full citizens. Those who opted for 'American nationality' desired complete

amalgamation and did not support racial self-help efforts. Meier further distinguishes a split between those who stressed agitation for civil rights and those who emphasised economic advancement as being of paramount importance in order to gain equality and acceptance.[20]

The Emigration Issue

The controversy over the emigration issue was highlighted during Williams' sojourn in the US at the week-long Congress on Africa called by the Methodist Episcopal Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa, to coincide with the Chicago Exposition of 1893. Sadly, we do not know if Williams was able to attend. However, even if he could not, he would undoubtedly have read about it in the Black newspapers, and heard others he probably did know, such as T. Thomas Fortune and Bishop Alexander Walters speak about it.

At the Congress the Foundation advocated that African Americans who were highly skilled should emigrate to Africa in order to 'furnish civilization and redemption'. Others spoke on the slave trade, health conditions, the religions and languages of Africa; Liberia was defended against the prevalent criticism of lack of 'civilization' and 'progress' there despite the settlement of Black Americans. Among those present were Frederick Douglass, Bishop Arnett, Alexander Crummell, W. S. Scarborough, and Bishop Walters. Those who sent papers they could not themselves present were anti-emigrationist T. Thomas Fortune[21], emigrationist Bishop James Holly[22] and the Revd. James Johnson of Nigeria.[23]

One of the speakers was AME emigrationist Bishop Henry McNeal Turner who maintained that 'heathen Africans . . . eagerly yearn for civilization.' Most of the enslaved Africans who had been taken to the Americas were the children of hereditary slaves and were destined to remain in slavery until they learned about God. 'There is no manhood future in the United States for the Negro' and the 'Negroid race' could expect nothing without social equality, but Whites would never grant that. Proclaiming that Adam was a Black man, Turner called on Negroes to help succour Africans by emigrating there with their greater skills and Christian virtues.[24] Bishop Walters opposed mass emigration, but believed that some skilled and highly educated Negroes should settle in their motherland. Bishop Holly, who was not at the Congress, had, as we know, previously espoused emigration to the Caribbean. Others rejected emigration altogether, arguing that the United States had been built by Black blood, sweat and tears, and thus Negroes were entitled to share in its wealth.[25] Among the latter were the young W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, who did not attend the Congress. (Washington seldom graced with his presence any meeting he had not himself called.)

Williams was therefore confronted with much debate both at meetings and through the Black press.

The Black Activists Williams Might Have Met

Alexander Walters was not only a bishop of the AMEZ Church, but a man much involved in politics, attending local and international religious/ecumenical conferences, at which he was very outspoken about the many forms of racial discrimination.[26]

D. Augustus Straker, born in Barbados, was a lawyer and also a member of the Afro-American League, and became one of the most successful lawyers fighting many civil rights cases.

T. Thomas Fortune formed National Afro-American League in 1887 (renamed National Afro-American Council in 1898) to fight for the rights of 'negroes' in local branches.

It is much more difficult to place Bishop Holly among these political activists who knew each other and at times worked together, as he lived most of his life in Haiti as an Episcopal minister and then bishop—but he did attend conferences in the US and one in London. While it is quite possible that Williams did not meet the Bishop, but from reading his articles Williams would have received more diverse perspectives on current African American issues such as emigration and the power of the franchise, on the meaning of race and the need for racial unity, as well as on imperialism and socialism. It is therefore easy to understand what was to lead Williams to ask Bishop Holly to attend the Pan-African Conference.

Booker T. Washington was, by the 1890s, the great proselytiser for industrial education for African Americans.[27] He advised 'negroes' to respect the law, co-operate with White authority and maintain peace. In a famous 1895 speech he condoned segregation; Blacks could achieve equality by sheer hard work, he argued.

Walters, Straker, Fortune, Holly, Booker T. Washington: some in the forefront and some in the second rank of the political thinkers and activists of the day. Williams clearly sought, and found, sources and venues for a vast broadening of his political education, which he had begun in Trinidad. His relatively cosmopolitan life in Trinidad would perhaps have made it relatively easy for him to meet, discuss and debate with men and women not only from a different culture, and not only older than he (in an era when age still begat respect), but of considerable standing, experience and authority.

Did Williams attempt to improve his education in the US? If not, why not? We can only guess. When—and why—did he decide that he wanted to be a lawyer? As he decided to seek further education in Canada, a British colony, had he either become disenchanted with the US, or had he all along planned to return to his home with a British qualification? Did he from the beginning aim to obtain legal training? Given that he had almost no educational qualifications, is it safe to presume that he felt that at a Canadian educational institution it might be easier to obtain the required certificates for admission to legal training in the UK?

WILLIAMS IN NOVA SCOTIA

Blacks in Nova Scotia

Why did William choose to enrol at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia? Did he not know of the situation of Black people on that cold island off the coast of Canada? The 'Black Loyalists' were probably the first settlers there of African descent. They were Blacks whom, during their struggle with the American colonists wanting their independence, the British had enlisted and freed. Having lost the war, some of the freed Blacks were settled on the island; others were sent to the Caribbean, where some were re-enslaved. In Nova Scotia the Black Loyalists were immediately confronted with racial discrimination by the White settlers and the British government: the best, most fertile lands were given to the Whites. Eventually Black protest resulted in many re-emigrating to new settlements in Sierra Leone.[28]

About 450 Black Loyalists remained in Nova Scotia; their numbers were augmented by more slaves freed by the British, again for fighting for them against Americans in 1812. A few of the enslaved fleeing north to Canada also settled on the island; thus by 1860, there were about 6,000 Black Nova Scotians.[29]

Many of the new arrivals had few skills; the segregated education system was not about to provide them with more. According to historian Justin Johnston, 'being a black man during the late 19th century in Nova Scotia would have been hard, few jobs, poverty, intense racial segregation and limited educational opportunities. . . . This was a time when most persons left for Upper Canada or the United States, where there were more favourable social and economic conditions. . . . Williams . . . in no way could have prepared himself for the racism that he would find there.' Colin A. Thomson, another historian, describes Blacks' 'scattered settlements . . . often appendages to white communities upon which they depended for employment. . . . Blacks were seen as a less desirable element, lacking in thrift and industry . . . in the late 19th century Blacks presented no united front, had few common goals . . . they were divided geographically and historically. . . . Thousands of children remained illiterate.' [30]

Black Students at Dalhousie

Henry Sylvester Williams enrolled for the autumn term of the academic year 1893–1894 at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia.[31] He was the second Black student: The first was James Robinson Johnston, the son of Elizabeth and William Johnston, both 'influential figures in the black community', who had enrolled as an undergraduate in 1892. The Johnston family's connections and James' many school prizes permitted his entry into first an all-White school, and then into Halifax Academy, from where he had graduated. [32]