By Tariq Ali

CLR James is now, by any standards, an old man. He appears somewhat frail, but this impression evaporates when he begins to talk. It is almost as if one is being transported back to the polemical debates and arguments of the Thirties. James was born in the West Indies some 80 years ago. He came to Britain in the Thirties and soon developed a reputation as a socialist writer and historian. He had last heard him speak at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in the Roundhouse in 1967. On that occasion he had clashed fiercely with the black American leader Stokely Carmichael. 'Race is decisive,' Carmichael had thundered, 'No,' James had replied with quiet dignity, 'it is class.'

The same year James spoke at an International Marxist Group meeting in Birmingham, held to pay tribute to Malcolm X.

CLR James was a Trotskyist and a member of the Fourth International for 17 years. His conversations with Trotsky were published under the pseudonym of Johnstone. He left because of differences on the class character of the Soviet Union.

He is presently in London for the publication of a number of his writings by Allison and Busby, including a revised edition of his classic The Black Jacobins. I met him last week in his hotel room. He stipulated one condition for the interview. It must end as the Second Test Match began, as he did not want to miss a single minute of cricket.

TA: What were the main literary influences on you in your youth? What were the first books you read and how much impact did they make on you?
CLR: The greatest literary influence on me before I left the Caribbean was William Makepeace Thackery. I first read Vanity Fair when I was nine years old. Subsequently I read it on nine other occasions. I didn't know it was a library class.

My mother had a Shakespeare, Vanity Fair, and another book called John Halifax, Gentleman. These were on the shelf and I was living in the Caribbean countryside with nothing to do, so I read.

Thackery and his constant attacks upon the aristocracy had more part in shaping my attitude towards the establishment than Marx.

TA: Would you say your views have altered over the last decades at all, or are you still as insatiable as ever on the themes close to your heart?
CLR: My views haven't altered. I left the Trotskyist movement in 1951, but I have remained an independent Marxist ever since.

I do not subordinate myself to any state. I have never been to Moscow, though I have much more sympathy with the Chinese developments. I am attached to no political organisation whatever.

TA: But how would you view world politics today? The situation has altered in many ways since the Thirties.
CLR: My view of world politics is based firmly on what Lenin said in 1914. He told us that this war was going to be an epoch of wars: imperialist wars, nationalist wars, civil wars. And of course, of a new revolution.

I see the old societies falling apart in severe crises and I don't think there is any way out except through building a new, socialist society. In that sense I have not changed since 1934, when I first joined the Fourth International.

It was Marx who first stated that the choice confronting humanity was socialism or barbarism. I believe that. I believe that in the last half century we have seen many examples of barbarism. Can I say something to you. I don't wish to start any controversy or polemic, but have you read Solzhenitsyn?

TA: Yes.

CLR: Well, how can we still say that the USSR is a workers' state, eh?

TA: But what Solzhenitsyn is writing about is things which surely Trotsky and his supporters knew about in the Thirties!
The Old Man used to often reflect on the fact that the purges and the trials were just the tip of the iceberg. You didn't appreciate the crimes carried out against a mass of the population during the collectivisation.

CLR: Of course, all I knew and thought and wrote about, but the concrete facts and the detail supplied by Solzhenitsyn is still a surprise. How can we in that any element of socialism?

TA: How would you view China today?
CLR: Now that is difficult for me to say, but I know that up till Mao's death I was always very sympathetic to the Cultural Revolution. Mao said that the two things which mattered most to him were the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek and of Japanese imperialism and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

It was, from my view, an attempt to get the proletariat to govern the country. Mao was genuinely interested in that process. He was trying to get the masses to play a greater role in governing the state and building a socialist society.

Since his death they have turned backwards, but I don't believe they can succeed.

TA: But how can you square all this — with which I disagree about the role of Mao's view of Stalin and the fact that the Stalin cult was promoted in China after the limited de-Stalinisation measures of Krushchev in 1956-7?

CLR: These are details, but nevertheless Mao held a view of Stalin which I disagree entirely, but despite this he avoided the pitfalls of Stalin's Russia.

TA: The slaves received the whip with more certainty and regularity than they received their bread. It was the intensity of work and the guardian of discipline.

But there was no iniquity that tear or a degraded imagination could devise worse. They were not employed to break their spirit and satisfy the lust and excitement of their owners and gaolers — iron on the hands and feet, blocks of wood that the slaves had to drag behind them wherever they went, the tin-plate shack to prevent the slaves eating the sugar-cane, the iron collar.

Whippings were interrupted in order to pass a piece of hot wood on the buttocks of the victim; salt, pepper, cinders, stones, ashes and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds. Mutilations were common, limbs, ears, and sometimes the private parts, to deprive them of the pleasures which they could indulge in without expense.

Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, impaled the burning cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on dawm fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and soaked them with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to steeped of sugar or water; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves.

One colonist was known in moments of anger to throw himself on his slaves and stick the tongs into their flesh.

From 'The Black Jacobins'
The Black Jacobins by CLR James is published by Alison & Busby at £4.95 pb.

It is available from The Other Bookshop, 298 Upper St, London N1. Add 10% if ordering by mail.