At Duvalier’s funeral, which I attended, there were numerous scenes of sadness and distress. We may well think that this popular attitude was ill-founded and misplaced but it did exist, and is part of the explanation for the survival of the regime.

David Nicholls, 1985, p. 224

It would not be an exaggeration to state that David Nicholls took a perverse pleasure in exposing the ways in which Caribbean intellectuals misinterpreted the region’s social and political reality. Given the fact that the Duvalier regime was more than simply a reign of terror, he was quick to point out that many anti-Duvalier intellectuals “underestimated—sometimes to their own cost—the degree of popular support (or at least benevolent neutrality) enjoyed by Duvalier” (1985, p. 34).

It was not just the ideologically blinkered Haitian intellectuals who came under sharp criticism. He was particularly keen on deflating the illusions of the Left in the Caribbean. He warns at the end of Haiti in Caribbean Context that “political strategies which assume the existence of a revolutionary working class or peasantry in the Antilles are bound to come to grief” (ibid., p. 238). This pattern is already evident in From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti. Nicholls, in his conclusion to this classic study of Haitian society and politics, took a swipe at Frantz Fanon whose theory of the importance of violence in the process of decolonization...
was being blindly applied to the Caribbean by leftist thinkers in the sixties. He poured cold water on their dreams of national liberation through violence by noting that in Haiti authoritarianism and divisiveness were left in the wake of the war of liberation. “The story of Haiti’s early years suggests that the violent decolonization struggle failed to bind Haitians together into an independent and united nation,” he wrote (1979, p. 251).

A little earlier in the same work a University of the West Indies colleague, the far less eminent Archibald Singham, suffered a similar fate. Singham in a recently published essay lamented the fact that colonial intellectuals in the Caribbean had failed to advocate a genuine liberation of the people because of “their counterrevolutionary ideas” and their alignment with “petty-bourgeois interests.” Nicholls wryly observed that “Singham (was) himself a startling exemplification of these tendencies, not only with respect to his collaboration with the conservative Jamaica Labour Party in the late 1960s but also to his recently acquired ‘Marxist’ jargon” (ibid., p. 249). He was no less brutal in deflating the self-importance of Haitian intellectuals. The leader of the Christian Social Party, the unfortunate Edouard Tardieu, might have quietly slipped into oblivion were it not for this memorably comic anecdote that Nicholls included not only in From Dessalines to Duvalier but also in Haiti in Caribbean Context.

Monsieur Edouard Tardieu was leader of the Christian Social Party in the election of 1946 and edited the party’s newspaper, (L’Action Sociale) the columns of which were filled principally with reports of his speeches. On the back page however, a regular feature was an advertisement for Madame Tardieu’s grocery shop. While he was upstairs writing political speeches, she was downstairs managing the family business and making sure that their budget could support the political adventures of her husband. (1985, p. 141)

Nicholls’s sharp eye for domestic detail made Tardieu’s defense of the oppressed and overworked masses of Haiti less than persuasive.

If there was one Haitian intellectual to whom Nicholls paid particular attention it was Jean Price-Mars. He begins the very