I knew we were man for man as good as anybody. I had known that since my schooldays. But if that were the truth it was not the whole truth.¹

—C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary

A cricket tour to England for Australians and South Africans resembled pilgrimages to a holy site, complete with rituals (such as dinners, toasts, luncheons, tea breaks, gentleman/player divisions) and relics (such as tour blazers, team photographs, and above all, the mythical Ashes). An outward-bound English tour to the white settler colonies could be compared to a papal legate touring distant dioceses. In contrast, before World War II, an English MCC tour to the West Indies resembled a benevolent missionary effort beyond the bounds of civilization where natives needed enlightenment and instruction. Like most missionaries, the English cricketers believed they had nothing to learn from the West Indies, and treated their hosts with at best paternalism and at worst with outright disdain. While cricket encounters with white settler colonies and dominions normally called forth odes to imperial unity and common racial heritage and culture, cricket with multiracial West Indies teams brought condescending platitudes and references to grown men as “boys” and “niggers.”

Relations between the British West Indies and Great Britain were strained and tense throughout the 1930s. The decade was one of political and labor turmoil throughout the Caribbean. The West Indian economies depended largely on agriculture, with over 50 percent of the population directly employed in agricultural production. When, following worldwide trends, agricultural prices fell by one half between 1928 and 1933, the West Indies experienced crippling unemployment, increased taxes, and wage cuts. When Lord Moyne conducted an investigation of the state of the West Indies in 1938–39, the findings were so damning that the British
suppressed the report for the duration of the war to avoid any disruptions of imperial unity. The report detailed that in many parts of the West Indies, wages had not risen from the one shilling a day rate that was established a century earlier upon the emancipation of the slaves.²

Neither the soldiers of Britain nor the West Indian regiments contributed significantly to warm ties of mutual admiration, as they did in the Anglo-Australian case. At the end of World War I, West Indian soldiers in Italy briefly mutinied in the face of British racism in the army and at home.³ A decade and a half later, on the second day of January 1933, less than two weeks before the Third Test at Adelaide, the military again figured prominently in an Anglo-West Indian dispute. Roughly 250 Northumberland Fusiliers stationed in Kingston rioted after one soldier died in a fight with a local. Despite widespread violence, injuries to Jamaican citizens and subjects of the crown, and great damage to property caused by the British soldiers, army quickly dismissed the incident as unimportant, a resolution indicative of the arrogant British treatment of West Indians in the Caribbean.⁴ Unlike the independent dominion of Australia, the West Indies were colonies—a fact not unrelated to the racial compositions of each of the societies—and accordingly their relationships with the British were much more unequal and less important than Anglo-Australian relations.

Collective memories of World War I, along with race, constitute the significant areas of difference between the Anglo-Australian and the Anglo-West Indian imperial relationships. For the West Indians, there was no mass shared experience of World War I to tie them to the British as near-equals in the same manner as the Australians. Conversely, of course, there was also no Gallipoli in their recent collective memory to feed the fires of resentment against the British either. A local politician in Western Australia welcomed the MCC touring side, by saying, “We look upon these visits as a powerful influence in cementing the bonds of Empire. In that respect they are, I think, second only to the influence of Australian soldiers in the Great War. Australia is part of the British Empire, and its people are the same stock as those of England.”⁵ A West Indian politician would have been unable to make the same speech.

The standing of the British in West Indian eyes was not what it had once been. By the 1930s there were independence movements around the Empire, which garnered much attention in the West Indies. Furthermore, the prime advantage to being in the British Empire for many in the West Indies was that the British provided a market for West Indian sugar. After a high point in World War I, sugar prices had fallen steadily since 1923 and precipitously since 1929. By 1933, three years after the British Parliament ignored Lord Oliver’s report recommending a British subsidy to the West Indian sugar industry, the price of sugar was still in a catastrophic decline. Moreover, as more West Indians immigrated to New York and Montreal, the United States and Canada began to rival Britain as potential metropoles. Hopelessness and resentment toward the British characterized West Indian public opinion in the 1920s and early 1930s.⁶