

Transcript of Dr Dexnell Peters' Oxford and Empire Network podcast on Dr Eric Williams.

Hello. My name is Dexnell Peters and I am the Bennett Boskey Fellow in Atlantic History at Exeter College, Oxford. I am from Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean and have been based in Oxford for the past two years.

I want to talk to you about eminent historian and head of government, Dr Eric Williams. But first, let me take you to Oxford through William's eyes. The place perhaps most associated with Williams in Oxford is St Catherine's College. The college is situated towards the East of Oxford on the banks of the river Cherwell. Perhaps one of the most characteristic aspects of the college is the fact that it is not enclosed by tall walls but rather has an open design. All of this would have been a bit unfamiliar to Williams, however, who arrived in Oxford in 1952. St Catherine's College was not yet a formal college. It was known as *St Catherine's Society* which was an association that enabled students to be members of the University without being members of a college, thus avoiding the prohibitive costs of an Oxford college.

Now back to Williams. Dr Williams led Trinidad and Tobago to independence from Britain and became the first prime minister of the country in 1962. He was not only influential in the early development of the country but also in the wider Caribbean region. He made foundational contributions in efforts toward Caribbean integration. Even more significantly, Dr Williams is perhaps best remembered globally for his scholarly contributions as an Oxford-trained Caribbean historian (1:40). He studied at St Catherine's College where he completed a BA in History in 1935 and later a DPhil in History in 1938.

His most influential work *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944, stemmed from his DPhil dissertation entitled: *The Economic Aspects of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave trade and Slavery*. *Capitalism and Slavery* with its several major theses and sub-theses opened up the study of the connections between slavery, the Atlantic slave trade, and its impact on European economies. It inspired debates that persist to the present day. Even one of the book's fiercest critics, historian Seymour Drescher categorizes it as a classic noting that "If one criterion of a classic is its ability to reorient our most basic way of viewing an object or a concept, Eric Williams's study supremely passes that test".

William's work has had a tremendous impact on the way in which we understand the British Empire today. *Capitalism and Slavery* made a significant argument about the accumulation of personal wealth in Britain based on Caribbean slavery as well as slavery's tremendous impact on British society, culture, and politics in the eighteenth century. Most recently, the University College of London's *Legacies of British Slaver ownership* project has highlighted the continued significance of *Capitalism and Slavery* and significantly expanded on William's initial research.

Beyond William's scholarship, he played a significant role in the Caribbean decolonization process. In fact, Williams was one of three Oxford-educated independence leaders in the Caribbean along with Norman Manley and Grantley Adams. Williams, Manley, and Adams

provide a good avenue to consider the relationship between Oxford and the decolonization process in the Caribbean.

As a Caribbean historian with some interest in connections between history and public policy and societal development, I am especially interested in Williams as the politician scholar. Reading *Capitalism and Slavery* helped me develop a rare passion for history and for conducting my own historical research. Through his work on a relatively distant past, Dr Williams caused a generation of Caribbean people to cherish and feel motivated by their heritage. In the same vein, I hope to encourage Caribbean people to appreciate the significance of having a better understanding of their history with the aim of inspiring greater regional pride and empowering them to forge a stronger future in the region for those to come. Thank you very much.