

Sir Arthur Lewis

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Pride: A celebration of West Indians who have influenced the world

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The first West Indian to win a Nobel Prize, St Lucia's Sir Arthur Lewis was one of the foremost economists and political activists of the 20th century.

The people of the West Indies are admired for many qualities – their natural athleticism and musicality, their vitality and humour, and that unique capacity for joyous celebration. Steel bands, Olympic medallists, calypso cricketers – it is not entirely a cliché. But it can obscure their achievement in less obvious areas: for example the number of distinguished writers, scholars and academicians they have given the world. St Lucia alone has produced not one but two Nobel Prize winners in the post-war era: the poet Derek Walcott, and the development economist Sir Arthur Lewis.

Born in January 1915, Lewis seemed just another ordinary kid until, at the age of seven, he fell ill and missed several weeks of school. During that time his father took his education in hand. On Lewis's return he was instantly promoted two grades. A fuse had been lit. By his 15th year he had mastered everything the system had to teach him. Too young to proceed to university, he left to work in the civil service.

At 17 he won a scholarship to the London School of Economics, and four years later, having achieved top grades throughout, he began his PhD in Economics. It became the platform for Professorships at Manchester and Harvard, a career as UN policy advisor to various governments, and decades of selfless and outstanding service to his native region.

Economics had not, in fact, been his first choice. His first love, engineering, was closed off to him by the colour bar – not the only occasion on which it had shaped his destiny. But that never made him bitter or affected his gentle and tolerant nature, learned from his remarkable mother. Widowed with five children when Lewis was just seven, she was also ‘the most highly disciplined and hardest working person I have ever known’.

But early encounters with prejudice may well have influenced his decision to specialise in Development Economics. There his achievement was to challenge the prevailing dogmas that assigned the role of manufacturing and wealth creation to the developed West, and to everyone else the supply of raw commodities. At the same time he resolved the age-old question of why wages might remain depressed even when industrial output rose. The answer, which many a plantation worker back home would have endorsed, lay in the endless supply of cheap labour, exacerbated in regions like his own by the lack of domestic capital. For these insights he was both applauded and vilified. But eventually his views prevailed, bringing him the Nobel Prize in his subject, and a knighthood.

After 1970 he devoted himself to three great causes. He oversaw the setting up of the Caribbean Development Bank; became Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the new University of the West Indies; and worked tirelessly for the West Indian Federation, a short-lived experiment whose failure he always regretted.

Blending the patient determination of a Brian Lara with the fearlessness of a Viv Richards, Lewis saw off a great many mean-spirited economic theories in his time, and brought much good to the region he so loved.