

Growing up in St Lucia

Nobel Prize winner William Arthur Lewis was born on the island of Saint Lucia on 23rd January 1915, the fourth of five sons of school teachers George and Ida Lewis, who had migrated from Antigua in the early years of the twentieth century. At seven an illness kept Lewis at home and his father taught him three years of the school curriculum in three months. On his return to school he advanced by two school grades.

Lewis’s education was also political and cultural. “My interest in development was a product of my anti-imperialism” – an interest sparked by attending a meeting of the local Universal Negro Improvement Association, established by the Jamaican, Marcus Garvey. Ida Lewis encouraged her son with a love of music and Lewis became an enthusiastic pianist and concertgoer.

After his father’s death Ida Lewis brought up her five sons alone. Lewis admired her discipline and hard work: “As a youngster in school, I would hear other boys talking about the superiority of men over women; I used to think that they must be crazy.”

Lewis completed the school curriculum at age 14. He went on to work as a clerk in the civil service for two years saying that, “This job was not wasted on me since it taught me to write, to type, to file and to be orderly.” In 1932, he sat the London Matriculation examination and was awarded the scholarship to attend the London School of Economics.

Aware of his restricted career options Lewis decided to study business administration to prepare him for a position in private industry or in St. Lucia’s colonial government. LSE’s Commerce Degree seemed to be ideal offering a “very practical” education in accounting, business management, commercial law and a little economics and statistics.



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First Degrees

B.Com. Intermediate—Day Time-Table, 1933-34.

First Year.

The subjects in italics are options or alternatives from which the student can select. The other subjects are compulsory. (For approved modern foreign languages, not included below, see pp. 288-289.)

Day.	Time.	Title of Course.	No. of hrs.	Term when held.	Lecturer.	Ref. No. in Calendar.
Mon.	2-4	<i>German</i>	60	M.L.S.	—	*
	2-3	<i>Spanish</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
	5-6	<i>English — Intermediate</i> (for foreign students)	29	M.L.S.	Mr. POOLE	.. 112
Tues.	10-11	Elements of Economics, I	25	M.L.S.	Prof. ROBBINS and Dr. BENHAM	25
	12-1	General Regional Geography	16	L.S.	Prof. JONES, Dr. STAMP, and Dr. ORMSBY	121
	2-3	<i>French</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
	3-4	<i>German</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
Wed.	2-3	<i>Spanish</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
	5-6	<i>English — Intermediate</i> (for foreign students)	29	M.L.S.	Mr. POOLE	.. 112
Thurs.	10-11	Statistical Method (Class)	10	M.	Dr. RHODES	.. 402
	11-12	Statistical Method ..	15	M.L.	Dr. RHODES	.. 402
	12-1	Growth of English Industry	25	M.L.S.	Prof. POWER	.. 130
	5-6	<i>English — Intermediate</i> (for foreign students)	29	M.L.S.	Mr. POOLE	.. 112
Fri.	10-11	Accounting, I	28	M.L.S.	Mr. ROWLAND	77
	2-3	<i>French</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
	2-3	<i>German</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
	2-3	<i>Spanish</i>	30	M.L.S.	—	*
Fri.	11-12	General Regional Geography	16	L.S.	Prof. JONES, Dr. STAMP, and Dr. ORMSBY	121
	12-1	Elements of Economics, II	14	L.S.	Mr. WHALE	.. 26

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“I never meant to be an economist. My father wanted me to be a lawyer but he died when I was seven; he had no vote at the appropriate time. I did not want to be a doctor either, nor a teacher. That put me in a hole, since law, medicine, preaching and teaching were the only professions open to blacks in my day. I wanted to be an engineer, but neither the colonial government nor the sugar plantations would hire a black engineer.”



“Marvellous Intellectual Feasts” LSE, 1933-48

Lewis gained a first class degree in 1937 and a scholarship for a PhD in industrial economics, completed in 1940. In his Nobel Prize lecture Lewis claimed: “I had no idea in 1933 what economics was.” This did not prevent him from taking advantage of the opportunities LSE provided.

Lewis experienced a wide range of intellectual influences during his time at LSE the “marvellous intellectual feasts” he later recalled. His autobiographical account, recalls his teachers John Hicks, Roy Allen, Nicholas Kaldor, Friedrich Hayek and Lionel Robbins. His greatest personal debt was to the Professor of Commerce, Arnold Plant. “He was my mentor and without his word at crucial points I would have neither received the scholarship nor the assistant lectureship.”

London also provided opportunities to meet with radical anti-imperialists including CLR James, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah. However Lewis was an active member of the Fabian Colonial Bureau and in 1939 published a pamphlet on labour unrest in the West Indies.

In 1938, Lewis was appointed to a one-year teaching appointment, extended for four years and despite the Director’s ambivalence about the appointment Lewis became LSE’s first black faculty member. During LSE’s evacuation to Cambridge during the Second World War Lewis undertook a heavy load of economics teaching and Friedrich Hayek described Lewis as “one of our best teachers”.

At the same time Lewis undertook research for the Colonial Office into the financing of industrial development in the colonies. Later he was secretary to the newly formed Colonial Economic Advisory Committee (CEAC). Lewis described his secretaryship as “largely a waste of time” but his regular battles with the Colonial Office reflect his understanding of the wider role of economics in a community and his self confidence in taking on the Colonial Office and its experienced advisors.

Lewis was also a regular contributor to the Manchester Guardian writing articles on economic matters and became both an editor and contributor to *The Keys*, the quarterly journal of the League of Coloured Peoples founded in 1933 tackling racial discrimination and exploitation.



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“He would therefore not see students individually but in groups. The Appointments Committee is, as I said, quite unanimous but recognize that the appointment of a coloured man may possibly be open to some criticism. Normally, such appointments do not require the confirmation of the Governors but on this occasion I said that I should before taking any action submit the matter to you.”
Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, LSE Director



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1. LSE Students in Cambridge (LSE/Image Library/432)
2. Old Theatre, 1930s (LSE/Image Library/788)
3. Arnold Plant and Lionel Robbins with School Secretary, Jesse Mair (LSE/Image Library/808)

The Manchester Years, 1948-1957

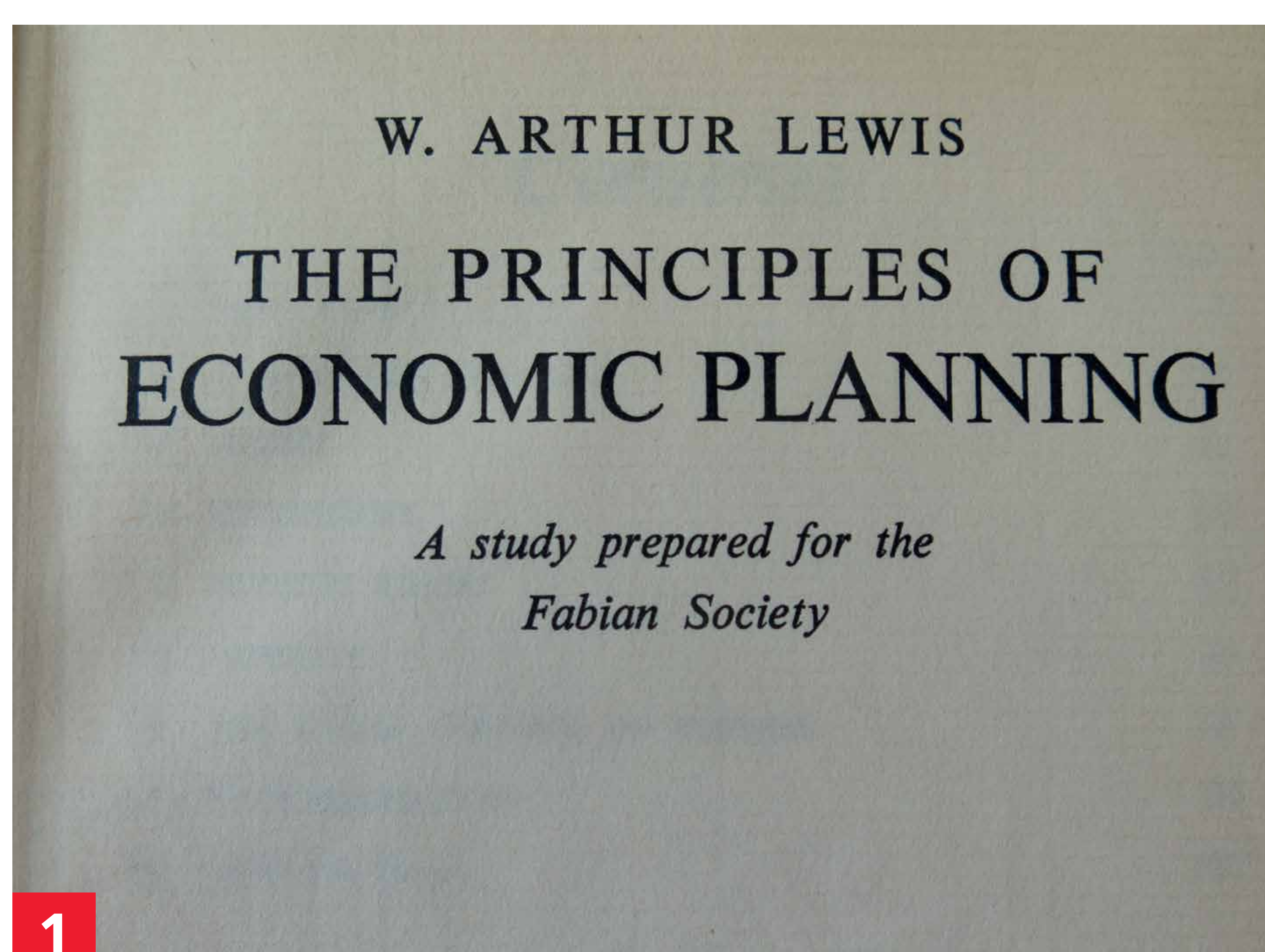
In 1947 Lewis was appointed to a readership in Colonial Economics at LSE but in 1948 resigned to take up a Chair in Economics at the University of Manchester. Lewis was Britain's first black professor and his significant scholarly contributions to development economics were made during his time at the University of Manchester.

In 1949 Lewis published *The Principles of Economic Planning* and in 1954 Lewis published in the journal, *The Manchester School*, his article *Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour*, his major theoretical discussion of the issues of development. The following year *The Theory of Economic Growth* expressed Lewis's conviction that development was not solely about the application of economic theory but involved an awareness of political, social and cultural factors. Throughout Lewis attached great significance to mass education and social development as agents of change. This work broke new ground in a new economic field and provided a hypothesis to be modelled and tested. In 1979 Lewis received the Nobel Prize for his work in the 1954 article.

During his time at Manchester Lewis began the extensive foreign travel and overseas consultancies which developed his credibility as a global policy advisor. He advised the Caribbean Commission and was a member of the Colonial Advisory Economic Council (from 1951 to 1953), as well as serving on the Committee for National Fuel in Britain, the United Nations Group of Experts and Board of Governors of Queen Elizabeth House in Oxford. He also worked as a consultant to a number of African and Caribbean governments including Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Nigeria, Barbados and Ghana.

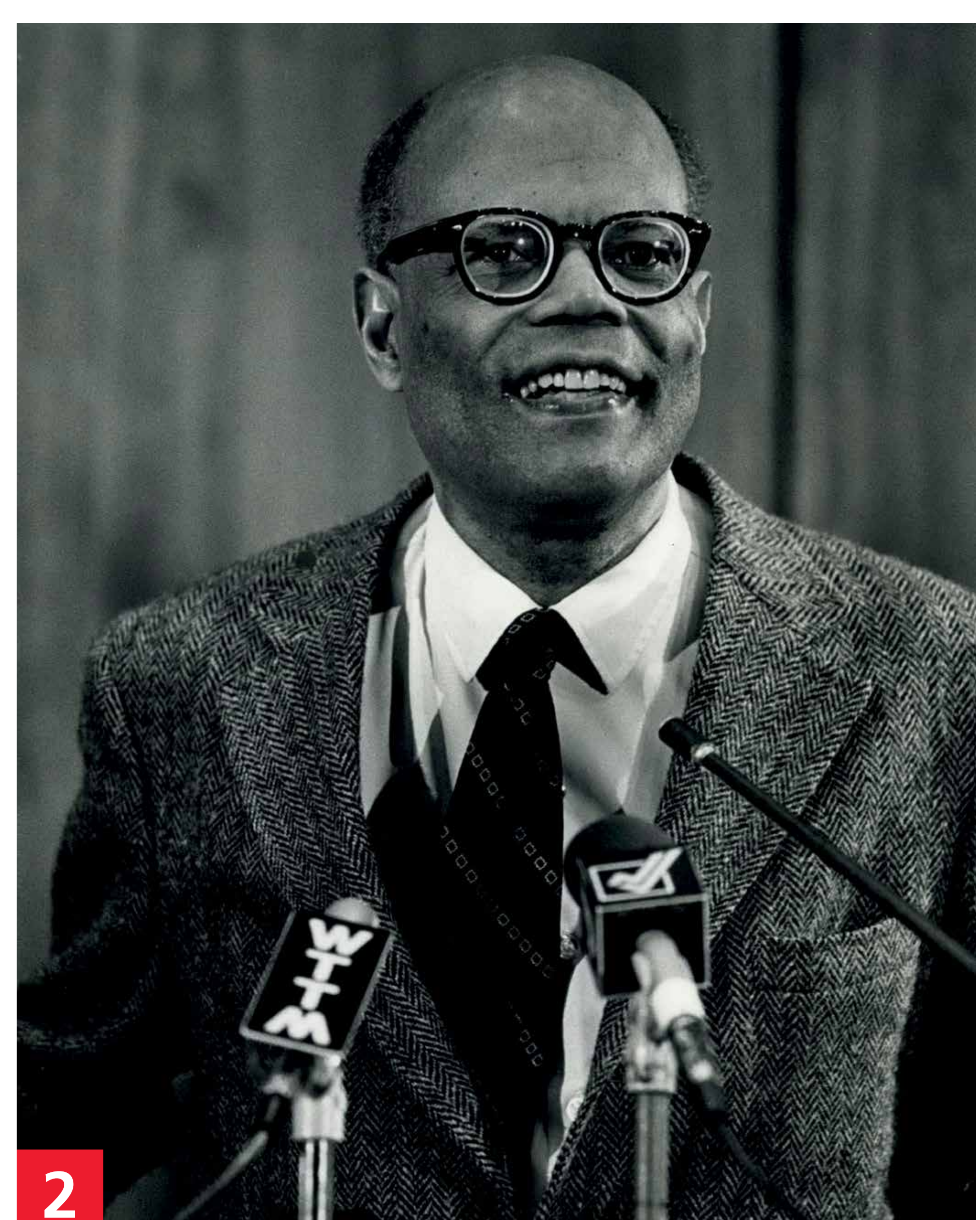
Lewis was closely involved with Manchester's Afro-Caribbean community and with his colleague, the South African anthropologist Max Gluckman, established two social centres in Moss Side and Hulme to support the large Afro-Caribbean population of those areas.

In 1947 Lewis had married Gladys Jacobs from Grenada. They had two daughters, Elizabeth and Barbara, and family life was a stable element in an increasingly globetrotting career.



1. Frontispiece *The Principles of Economic Planning* by W.Arthur Lewis (1949)
2. William Arthur Lewis, Alamy

"The fundamental cure for poverty is not money but knowledge" Sir Arthur Lewis



A Life of Service

After leaving the University of Manchester Lewis’s career was divided between administration and academic scholarship. For the first year he was the UN Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana’s first year of independence. He then spent a year as the Deputy Managing Director of the United Nations Special Fund before becoming Principal and then the first Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Under his guidance the University grew in size with enrolments increasing from 700 to over 2,000 students. His ability to attract funding from the Ford Foundation and the United Nations helped to develop new disciplines include a new School of Engineering.

In 1963 was knighted in recognition of his contribution to the Commonwealth and was also appointed professor at Princeton University. Lewis acted as a mentor to younger black scholars and supported the inclusion of African-centered materials in the university curriculum.

From 1970-1974 Lewis took leave of absence from Princeton to set up the Caribbean Development Bank where he served as its first President. He returned to Princeton as James Madison Professor of Political Economy remaining until his retirement in 1982. Despite ill health Lewis maintained an active interest in research.

In 1979 Sir Arthur Lewis shared the Nobel Prize for Economics with Theodore W Schulz for “pioneering research into economic development research with particular consideration of the problems of developing countries”. In January each year St Lucia celebrates Nobel Laureate Week, marking the Nobel Prizes of Lewis and his fellow St Lucian, the poet Derek Walcott.

In 1985 the St Lucian government renamed the Morne Educational Complex as The Sir Arthur Lewis Community College and following his death in 1991 Sir Arthur Lewis was buried in the grounds of the College.



“...that so far as understanding of relations between different races and countries at different stages of development are concerned, his writings, and still more his personal contacts, have done more in my judgement to bring about a sane appraisal of the problems involved than similar activities on the part of anyone else I have known.”
Lord Robbins



1. Sir Arthur Lewis addresses The Annual Conference of the Department of Public Information of the United Nations for Non-Governmental Organisations, *New Approaches to Development: Building A Just World*, 1984. (UN Photo/Saw Lwin)
2. Logo of the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College, St Lucia (©SALCC)
3. W.Arthur Lewis \$100 dollar bill (Eastern Caribbean Central Bank)