

Migration and Post-Colonialism: the Commonwealth Caribbean

by Mary Chamberlain

The story of migration from the Commonwealth Caribbean (formerly the British West Indies) began in 1838 and the start of the full, legal emancipation of the slaves.¹ The Caribbean, dominated by the labour demands of the plantation and the vagaries of the sugar economy, was characterised by poverty, under- and unemployment. Migration represented one of the few avenues for social mobility. Although resisted by the planters, who feared a loss of labour, West Indians, where possible, migrated, primarily to other Caribbean territories. The 1891 census for Trinidad recorded that in a population of 208,030, 33,071 were immigrants from the British West Indies (of whom 42% - 13,890 - were from Barbados and a further 1,259 from 'foreign West Indies'.)² Many of the immigrants stayed permanently but many also travelled back and forth across the islands and the mainland in seasonable employment or, in the case of women, trafficked goods and produce between the islands and the mainland.

For the most part, destinations were limited but in 1904 the American-owned Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) re-opened the project to build the Panama Canal and began to recruit actively in the British West Indies. Between 1904 and 1914 between 42,000 to 60,000 Barbadians migrated to the Panama region, along with 91,000 Jamaicans and unknown numbers of migrants from the Eastern Caribbean.³ Once the floodgates were opened other destinations came on line. Many of those who migrated to Panama, re-migrated, to Costa Rica, to Cuba, to the Dominican Republic or to other destinations in the circum Caribbean. Others went to South America – to Peru,⁴ or Brazil⁵ or Venezuela. By 1933, the Colonial Office had estimated that approximately 10,000 British West Indians were resident in Venezuela, 'considerable numbers' in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, approximately 600 in Brazil, between 300 and 400 in Haiti, between 8,000 and 10,000 in the Dominican Republic and, of the 90,000 'negroes' resident still in Panama, approximately 50% were considered of British West Indian, of mainly Jamaican or Barbadian origin. In Cuba, there were sufficient British West Indians to constitute 'a substantial problem.'⁶ Above all, West Indians went to the United States, sending back remittances and goods, and whenever circumstances permitted, returning for longer, or shorter, periods. By 1890, there were already 19,979 foreign born black people in the United States, by far the majority of whom were West Indians, a figure which had risen to 73,808 by 1920 and 98,620 by 1930.⁷ Indeed, between 1899 and 1931, 107,892 Caribbean born people had emigrated to the United States,⁸ (where they made an important contribution to the Harlem Renaissance). From 1924,

however, legislation effectively closed off the United States as a destination for West Indians.

By the start of the twentieth century it was possible to talk of traditions, if not cultures, of migration, characterized by what Elizabeth Thomas Hope usefully described as 'strategies of adjustment' which reflected 'the deeply rooted significance of migration to the society.'⁹ Family structures, in particular, accommodated, encouraged and often depended on migration to the extent that migration itself – and the expectation to migrate - had become not only a component of the culture of the island but, crucially, of the family itself.¹⁰ Families assisted the would-be migrant through raising funds for travel and through fostering their children; migrants, in turn, sent back money and goods for family support. In the 'host' societies migrants 'received' kin or friends, building up networks and neighbourhoods which often resembled in their demographic composition the villages 'back home'.

Post-war migration to Europe must, therefore, be seen in the light of a long migratory history. Between the wars there had been a small community of West Indians resident in Britain comprised mainly of students, intellectuals and radicals (George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Marcus Garvey were all resident in London, along with Dr. Harold Moody). Some West Indian seamen had also ended up residing in some of the port towns such as Cardiff and Liverpool. West Indians had volunteered for service in the First World War and, again, in the Second World War and, despite initial reluctance by the War Office, many had been posted in Britain and seen active duty. The West Indies they returned to after the war was, however, as impoverished as when they left it, despite the efforts of the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund set up, in the wake of the Moyne Commission (appointed to investigate the causes of the major riots in the 1930s) to improve conditions. In 1948, some of these former servicemen, along with other Jamaicans, decided to return to Britain either to re-enlist in the Royal Air Force, or to assist in the post-war reconstruction of Britain, and booked passages on the S.S. Windrush. On 22 June 1948, 492 West Indians (mainly Jamaicans) disembarked in Tilbury (London) and were temporarily housed in a former air-raid shelter in Clapham, South London. The nearest employment exchange was in Brixton, and it was from there that they found work, and housing.

West Indian migration to Britain was slow at first, but by the early 1950s was gathering momentum. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act in the United States once again cut off the United States as a migrant destination. This, coupled with increasing opportunities for employment in the United Kingdom, helped divert the migration flow to Britain. Although accurate figures are difficult to ascertain, the table below gives an indication of the scale and pacing of the migration.

Table 1

| Year | Total arrivals M.S.D. ¹¹ | Total arrivals Home Office | Net Inward Movement Home Office |
|------|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1951 | 898 | | |
| 1952 | 1,281 | 2,200 | |
| 1953 | 2,285 | 2,300 | |
| 1954 | 10,261 | 9,200 | |
| 1955 | 24,473 | 30,370 | 27,500 |
| 1956 | 26,441 | 33,400 | 29,800 |
| 1957 | 22,473 | 27,620 | 23,020 |
| 1958 | 16,511 | 20,710 | 15,020 |
| 1959 | 20,397 | 22,390 | 16,390 |
| 1960 | 45,706 | 57,170 | 49,670 |
| 1961 | 61,749 | 74,590 | 66,290 |

Source: G.C.K.Peach 'West Indian Migration to Britain' *International Migration Review*, Vol. 1 No.2 (Spring) 1967, p.37.

The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1961 which aimed to limit migrants from the 'new' commonwealth, led to a surge in migration as West Indians attempted to enter Britain before the controls came into force. There was a similar surge before the 1965 Immigration Act. In 1965, however, the United States relaxed its restrictions on migration from the Caribbean and, along with Canada, North America returned on stream as the West Indian migrant destination of choice.

The majority of Caribbean peoples who migrated to Britain arrived, therefore, between 1948 and 1965. The first to arrive were Jamaicans, and they formed the majority of Caribbean migrants, (57 per cent in 1961)¹², although in the 1950s sizeable numbers of Barbadians and Guianese arrived, along with smaller numbers from the Eastern Caribbean. Women migrated, along with men, and most were relatively young – between eighteen and thirty years of age. Those with children chose, for the most part, to leave them initially with kin in the Caribbean, returning remittances to help support them and the wider family back home. Most of those who came intended their stay to be temporary, and planned to return within three to five years. In 1961, the Caribbean *born* population was estimated at 172,877. By 1971, the Caribbean population was thought to be at 548,000. The rapid growth in the population was accounted for by their children born in Britain (an estimated 244,000) and those 'sent for' to be reunited with a parent.¹³ The 2001 census revealed that the current 'black Caribbean' population stands at 565, 876, of whom the vast majority (79%) have been born in the UK.¹⁴ The declining numbers of those born in the Caribbean reflected the death and aging of its population – but also, significantly, a trend to return to the West Indies. While the Caribbean population fell from 548,000 in 1971 to 495,000 in 1986, the Caribbean born population declined from 330,000 in 1966 to 230,000 in 1986, most of whom had returned to the West Indies.¹⁵ At the same

time, the relatively small growth in the black Caribbean population has been more than matched by that of the mixed race population, who comprised approximately 677,117 of the UK population (1.2 per cent),¹⁶ of whom the majority were the children of white and Caribbean parentage.¹⁷

This basic data necessarily hides important aspects of West Indian migration and important characteristics of that migrant experience. That most of the early migrants assumed their stay would be temporary accorded with models of migration familiar to them. Many of the first generation were the grandchildren of Panama migrants, where the pattern of return or re-migration was well established. Others had already migrated before, either to the United States as part of an agricultural quota in place during the wartime years, or to work on US bases or in the Dutch oil fields in the Caribbean. Many came with the ambition of seeing the 'Mother Country,' as they had been taught to believe Great Britain represented. They arrived at a time when Britain itself was engaged in post-war reconstruction of its housing, industrial and transport infra-structure and building up the National Health Service. Britain needed labour. Reluctant at first to encourage labour from the Commonwealth, Britain finally conceded and from the 1950s promoted herself as a source of employment, actively recruiting in certain key industries. The Barbados government also actively encouraged and facilitated its population to secure training and employment in Britain.

What the migrants found in Britain was sharply at variance with what they had been led to expect. Far from welcoming the migrants, British society revealed itself to be racist and hypocritical. West Indians found themselves discriminated against in employment, housing, leisure, education and in church. They were attacked by gangs of teddy boys and found a police force indifferent to their safety. Riots in Nottingham and in Notting Hill, London, in 1958 and a growing white resentment against West Indian migrants, and those from the Indian sub-continent, led to the passing of the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1961- the attempt by the then Conservative government to restrict entry and appease popular opinion – followed by further acts in 1965 and 1968. In that year, the Conservative MP, Enoch Powell prophesied in a now notorious speech that should immigration continue, 'rivers of blood' would flow through British cities.

With access to housing, education and other public and private facilities characterised by prejudice (it was not uncommon for landlords to advertise 'No blacks. No Irish. No Dogs' on their vacant properties), and with a public clamour against 'coloured' immigrants, West Indians sought their own solutions. In the Caribbean 'meeting turns,' 'sous-sous' 'partnering' were all names for the same simple credit circle. Utilising these as a means of raising capital (no bank or building society was prepared to offer loans to West Indians), they bought properties in the inner cities, renting out rooms to other West Indians; they set up Saturday schools to make good the educational deficit which their children were experiencing; they established markets to import and sell their own food; they set up their own churches for worship along with a host of other self-help organisations and they established book shops and publishing houses. They also

lobbied hard against racial discrimination and in 1965 the first Race Relations Act was passed, followed by tougher legislation in 1968, and 1976.

Above all, West Indians found solace in their families. Although historically and contemporaneously vilified for their 'dysfunctional' and 'irregular' patterns (Caribbean families in the Caribbean and overseas have been, and remain, characterised by high levels of cohabitation, high levels of single parent mother headed households and relatively low levels of marriage¹⁸), Caribbean families have emerged as enduring and inclusive institutions which provide robust support for kin and maintain contact across the generations and across the oceans. Although the Caribbean community in Britain is now in its third and even fourth generations, the links with the Caribbean remain vibrant, even for those of mixed-race ethnicity who more often self-identify as 'Black British'. The trend to return has renewed links with the Caribbean for a new generation, while many British born Caribbeans are themselves now 'returning' to live in the Caribbean.¹⁹

Yet the legacy of early West Indian experience in Britain lingers. While discrimination is illegal, there are real issues of social exclusion. Second generation African-Caribbeans are more likely to suffer from mental illness; black and mixed race children are more like to be taken into local authority care, and for longer periods than their white counterparts, and black British nationals accounted for eleven per cent of the sentenced population in prison (by far the largest ethnic minority) and thirteen per cent of the remand population.²⁰ In terms of education, African-Caribbean boys, particularly, are failing to achieve minimum education targets, the result partly of 'low teacher expectations... and] inadequate levels of positive teacher attention, unfair behaviour management practices, disproportionately high levels of exclusion and an inappropriate curriculum.'²¹ The 1999 Macpherson Report (which detailed the failures of the Metropolitan Police in their investigation into the murder of the young Jamaican-heritage student, Stephen Lawrence) identified what it termed 'institutional racism' which, it claimed, permeated London's Metropolitan Police Service and inhibited the delivery of a fair and equitable service. Certainly, discrimination and racism were one of the central causes of schizophrenia identified by Dinesh Bhugra,²² and may well be a factor in explaining the alienation of some black youth and the appeal of violent gang culture with its allure of masculinity, status and drugs.

The issues of social exclusion should not crowd out the contributions which Caribbean migrants have given to Britain and to the Caribbean. They were critical to the post-war reconstruction of Britain and in the development of the National Health Service. They have achieved important distinctions in a range of arenas: central government (the current Attorney General, Baroness Scotland, is a migrant from St. Kitts, and there are many Caribbeans who sit in both Houses of Parliament), local government, in the judiciary, in professions and businesses, as well as in sports, music and the arts. Moreover, given that Caribbeans have the largest number of exogamous partnerships of all ethnic minorities, they may be seen to be integrated. The Caribbean orientation of many migrants and their families has had important repercussions for the region. The return of many African Caribbeans has led to relatively high levels of investment in the

Caribbean in terms of home ownership, pensions and remittances.²³ Here, the link between diaspora and development is well documented.²⁴

Despite the impoverished state which the Caribbean inherited at independence from the British, and the centuries of neglect and abuse which preceded it, the role of migrants in their – and our – development is critical. That the region has produced, in a short period, several Nobel prize winners, and has continued to enrich the culture of Britain (and the world) through its literature, music and carnival and its values, tolerance and industry is a cause for celebration.

Notes

¹ The terms 'West Indies' or 'West Indian' refer generally to the pre-independence colonies and colonials. The terms 'Caribbean' and 'Caribbeans' or 'Afro-Caribbean' reflect more contemporary usage. The latter is now used as a UK census category.

² National Archives (UK): CO 298/47

³ Velma Newton, *The Silver Men. West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914* (Kingston, University of the West Indies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1987), p.93

⁴ Howard Johnson 'Barbadian migrants in the Putumayo district of the Amazon 1904-1911' in Mary Chamberlain *Caribbean Migration: Globalised Identities* London: Routledge 1997.

⁵ Sidney Greenfield 'Barbadians in the Brazilian Amazon' *Luso-Brazilian Review* 20(1) 1983, pp. 4-64.

⁶ Barbados, Department of Archives. GH4/52, Colonial Office paper on position of British West Indians in Central and South American countries.n.d. but presumably 1933).

⁷ Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁸ James, Winston, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia. Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America*, London: Verso, 1998, p.357

⁹ Thomas Hope, Elizabeth *Explanation in Caribbean Migration* (London: Macmillan 1992)

p.5

¹⁰ Chamberlain, Mary *Narratives of Exile and Return*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004 (1997); Chamberlain, Mary *Family Love in the Caribbean. Migration and the Anglo-Caribbean Experience* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers/Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006

¹¹ Migrant Services Division of the Commission in the U.K. for the West Indies, British Guiana and British Honduras

¹² Owen

¹³ David Owen 'A profile of Caribbean households and families in Great Britain' in Harry Goulbourne and Mary Chamberlain (eds.) *Caribbean Families in Britain and the Trans-Atlantic World* (London and Oxford: Macmillan, 2001), pp.64-91.

¹⁴ UK census 2001. www.statistics.gov.uk. Part of the problem in reviewing population figures has rested with the shifting classifications used (and used by) the Caribbean population in Britain. In any case, those measured refer only to African-Caribbeans. There is no classification in the UK census to identify Indo-Caribbeans nor, in earlier years, was it possible to identify those born in the Caribbean and those born in the UK. There is, furthermore, a growing category of mixed race peoples. For a fuller discussion of these issues see David Owen 'A profile of Caribbean households'

¹⁵ Ceri Peach *The Caribbean in Europe: Contrasting Patterns of Migration and Settlement in Britain, France and the Netherlands*. Research Papers in Ethnic Relations No. 15 (Coventry: Centre for Research in Race Relations, University of Warwick, 1991), p.2. See also Margaret Byron and Stephanie Condon 'A Comparative Study of Caribbean Return Migration from Britain

and France: Towards a Context Dependent Explanation', *Transaction, Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1996

¹⁶ UK Census 2001

¹⁷ Owen 'A profile'

¹⁸ See Owen 'A profile'. For a fuller discussion on Caribbean families see Mary Chamberlain *Family Love in the Diaspora*; Godfrey St. Bernard 'Demographic characteristics of families and living arrangements in the Commonwealth Caribbean' in Goulbourne and Chamberlain (eds.) *Caribbean Families*

See, for instance, Potter, R. B. and Phillips, J. (2008) "The past is still right here in the present": second-generation Bajan-Brit transnational migrants' views on issues relating to race and colour class *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26, pp.123-145; Conway, D. and Potter, R. B. (2007) Caribbean transnational return migrants as agents of change *Geography Compass*, 1, 25-45.

²⁰ White males made up 84% of the prison population in 2002. *UK Census 2001*

²¹ *Educational Experiences and Achievements of Black Boys in London Schools 2000-2003*, London Development Agency, 2004. (Key findings)

²² Dinesh Bhugra 'Migration and schizophrenia' *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavia* 102 (suppl. 407), 2000, 68-73.

²³ Harry Goulbourne and Mary Chamberlain *Living arrangements, family structure and social change of Caribbeans in Britain*, Final Report, ESRC 1998. The importance of this along with remittances in furthering development in the Caribbean region is discussed by

²⁴ Nurse, Keith *Remittances and Beyond: Diaspora and Development in the Caribbean*, 2008

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