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# **Work and Education: Caribbean Migrations Transcript**

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## **Work and Education: Caribbean Migrations**

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In the 1930s the editorial of a West Indian paper stated that West Indians migrated for two reasons: work and education. To the extent that the statement was true it applied to the West Indian migration to Britain after the Second World War as it had applied to other movements out of the region. In this presentation I intend to look at what was common and what different about the West Indian migration to Britain. 'Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice' should be the guiding light of historians, but applies especially to talking about West Indian migration to Britain. Much of what has been said has been maliciously wrong or foolishly defensive.

### The Causes of West Indian Migrations

Population movements were common even in the pre-emancipation history of the West Indies. Planters or would-be planters moved from one territory to another, often with their slaves, e.g. the late eighteenth century settlement of Trinidad by French planters and their slaves; some slaves fled particular territories; a small number of free people moved to independent Haiti. The large movements, however, began after emancipation and continued to the present.

The prime motivating force was economic. West Indian populations during the slave era were closely matched to the demands of plantation crops, predominantly sugar; they also, like every other slave population in the Americas except that of the USA, failed to increase naturally, needing imports from Africa or other West Indian territories. The end of slavery saw a decline in sugar production and the movement away from labour in the cane fields and sugar factories brought, as well as freedom, population growth - the pattern of negative population growth and continued sugar production tended to hold for much of the nineteenth century, in the sugar areas of Jamaica for instance. Barbados had been on the brink of natural increase before the end of slavery and even before emancipation some of the Barbadian elite considered emigration to be essential. The freed populations of the Caribbean, as sugar declined and populations grew, became surplus labour as no satisfactory replacement for sugar as an employer of labour has ever been found in the Caribbean. This was the primary driving force behind the population movements from the British West Indian colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic with later developing sugar industries would exhibit the same demographic patterns in the twentieth century. Contributing to this were battles over wage levels (the primary cause of labour 'shortages': wages on the Panama Railway in the 1850s were three times those in Jamaica, Venezuelan rates in the mines in the 1870s were seven times those of agricultural labourers in St. Lucia). Limited access to land (British Guiana was losing labour to Suriname because of this by 1914) and changing employment patterns in the sugar industry also contributed (unlike the days of slavery when the work force was fully employed throughout the year, seasonal employment became the pattern - people looked for more regular employment elsewhere).

Yet emigration was never purely an economic matter. Education became one of the great goals of the freed people of the West Indies. Primary or elementary education, though never universal, covered an increasing percentage of the population as the nineteenth century wore on but the opportunities for secondary and higher education were few. Some teaching training took place and some training for the church; one of the first streams of West Indian emigration to the USA took place from the mid-nineteenth with the Episcopalian (Anglican) Church in the USA after the Civil War using West Indians to supply the ministers it could not find among the African American freed people. The best known of these was J R Love who moved to Haiti and then Jamaica after training in the USA. He was an early Pan-Africanist and a major influence on Marcus Garvey, who found fame organising African Americans in the USA just after the First World War (he died in London in 1940).

Politics, even if more important in the rest of the Caribbean, did play some part in British West Indian migrations in the nineteenth century (Haitians frequently moved to Jamaica, Cubans left Cuba for the rest of the Caribbean and the USA). The free coloureds of Trinidad were talking of going to Haiti even before emancipation and some at least of the post-emancipation migration to Haiti and even to Africa in the course of the century must have had a political motive. Frederick Alexander Durham, a Trinidadian law student, published a book in 1892 in London advocating migration to Africa - he seems to have acted on his word and may have been in Liberia after graduating and certainly ended up in the Gold Coast. (One of his brothers was a founding member of the African Association which later organised the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London). For men and women like these the class and colour barriers of the British West Indies proved powerful incentives to move. A violently prejudiced British consul in Haiti recognised why Haiti was so attractive, writing that West Indians in Haiti 'are of a most insolent demeanour. This being the Black Man's paradise, the few whites (myself included) have to take a back seat, and eat humble pie.'

As time passed there undoubtedly developed an expectation that migration was one of the few choices available to West Indians. This was an extremely practical decision though some scholars stress the psychological aspect (a new Trinidadian writer, Robert Antoni [Guardian 31/10/98 Saturday Review p.11] has blamed our psychological wounds for our tendency to emigrate: 'the nightmare into which each of us is born, from which we will always struggle to escape; it is part of our phylogenetic inheritance. The scar which drives so many of us into exile...').

Over-populated (and in some ways over-educated) Barbados rapidly became known for supplying teachers and policemen to the rest of the BWI: there the migration tradition first established itself. Jamaica with its declining sugar industry soon followed. The collapse of sugar industries elsewhere, and especially the sugar crisis of the late nineteenth century and the continuing failure of the BWI economies to recover before 1914 - unique among sugar producers - helped to consolidate the tradition elsewhere. Mary Seacole explained her own reasons for moving to Panama.

Early in the same year [1850] my brother left Kingston for the Isthmus of Panama...where he had established a considerable store and hotel. Ever since he had done so, I had found some difficulty in checking my reviving disposition to roam, and at last persuading myself that I might be of use to him (he was far from strong), I resigned my house into the hands of a cousin and made arrangements to journey to Chagres.

Even in good times the population of the BWI moved - once established the tradition endured immune to political and economic changes. Yet surges in emigration are not explained by this tradition.

The previous quotation does show how information from migrants was important in encouraging people to migrate. West Indian emigration depended on deliberate recruitment and the initiative of individuals: before 1914 ex-indentured East Indians turned up in Haiti looking for work. They and others had learnt that a railway was to be built. About the initiatives of women who often moved as traders throughout the Caribbean, sometimes with children in tow, there is a lovely exemplary tale. A group of male West Indian labourers were taken miles into the Panamanian jungle during the building of the American Canal (between 1903 and 1914). At lunch-time as their thoughts turned to food a number of West Indian women, who had made their own way there, appeared with food for sale.

#### What West Indians Did

The period from about 1850 to 1920 marked the first great period of West Indian emigration. If the nineteenth century proved difficult for the BWI elsewhere in the Americas it was a time of expansion. In the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico, Central America, Venezuela and the Hispanic Caribbean economies expanded as the export sectors were modernised. Labourers from the BWI were recruited for three main sectors: export agriculture, infra-structural development and mining. Somewhat ironically therefore while the proprietors of British Caribbean sugar plantations complained of labour shortages West Indians emigrated to work on the plantations of their rivals. By the last decades of the nineteenth century they were also working on the banana plantations of Costa Rica.

The expansion of international trade and economic modernisation led to the improvement of the infra-structure of these countries. West Indians worked on the Panama Railway in the 1850s creating the first easy link between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans; twenty years later they helped build a railway in Costa Rica and a decade later one in Mexico. In the 1880s and 1890s the first, French, attempts to build the Panama Canal drew many Jamaicans to the Isthmus; the successful US effort from the early 1900s would involve even larger numbers of labourers, especially from Barbados and other territories.

Mining also attracted West Indian labourers. From the 1870s small numbers could be found in Venezuela; by 1882 the Inspector General of Mines for Venezuela would comment on the thousands of workers there from 'the British and French West Indies'. French Guianese gold-fields attracted thousands of St. Lucians in the last decade of the nineteenth century during the world-wide boom in gold-mining. After the First World War they would help build and then work in the oil refineries of the Dutch Antilles.

The small emigration to Haiti and the larger one to the USA show West Indians going to jobs in the service sector and urban industries. This continued earlier patterns - the Barbadian teachers and policemen, the women as petty traders and in domestic service. The white emigrants from Barbados who in the nineteenth century left for 'Europe, the United States and other parts of the world' on the whole went to urban occupations too, though those who went to Australia helped start the Australian sugar industry. The decline in the plantation sector, so dominant in Caribbean economies, depressed the demand for urban as well as rural labour, for the skilled as well as the unskilled.

#### Why West Indians?

West Indians were wanted for two main reasons. In the first place they were used to capitalist methods, and to a wage economy. The sugar plantation had been a capitalist enterprise from its start in the Caribbean; in addition the peculiarities of the sugar cane and the sugar factory imposed industrial-type rhythms on the work force. With the decline of sugar this advantage would disappear but the wage economy remained. In many of the plantations, mines and construction projects West Indians were the pioneer labour force in societies where peasant, or non-capitalist arrangements, prevailed. After the establishment of the plantations or the mines or at the end of the construction projects West Indians became surplus to requirements. As the local labour force had by then been created out of the peasantries, the 1920s saw a rash of legislation banning or expelling West Indians from many Latin American countries.

The second advantage was that West Indians spoke English - many of the investors in Dominican Republic sugar plantations were British; the Americans especially in Central America were becoming the dominant investors and

on the Panama Canal West Indians often supplied the lower, cheaper ('silver dollar'), administrative and clerical posts because of their command of English.

Plainly neither was an advantage in either the USA or Britain: but in the USA the West Indians could find niches in segregated communities and use their education, skills and connections with the Caribbean to do well (so much so that the conservative American economist Thomas Sowell always uses them to beat his fellow African Americans with in arguing about culture and economic success).

#### Was Britain Different?

In many respects the emigration to Britain fitted neatly into this history. People moved for mainly economic reasons; education, either for themselves or their children was important; some felt the pace of change in the post-war West Indies was too slow.

Though the *Empire Windrush* does mark the start of large-scale West Indian emigration to Britain, it was really the shutting off of emigration to the USA that made Britain the popular destination that it became in the 1950s, until Britain, too, became less welcoming. West Indian migration becomes mass migration from about 1953. This at least does put into proper perspective the migration to Britain: it was not a sudden conversion among West Indians to the belief that there was something specially attractive about post-Second World War Britain or the result of a long deferred desire to settle in the Mother Country. West Indians had, after all, come to Britain during the First World War and had discovered just how welcoming Britain was during the riots of 1919 and their treatment, along with other Imperial seamen, as aliens rather than as British subjects in the 1920s, had not gone unnoticed. One West Indian paper in the 1930s quoted a local English paper describing West Indian sailors who were off to Japan to try their luck since they had had enough of the barriers to their employment in Britain. In the twenties there had even been a rehearsal of the criminal West Indian stereotype (see Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* [Lawrence and Wishart, 1992]). Intending immigrants are usually better informed of what awaits them than later commentators believe or they themselves are willing to admit, especially during the period before they migrate. The post-emancipation history of the BWI hardly attested to the benevolence of the British. Even if a distinction was made between the British abroad and at home a sufficient number of West Indians had stayed on after the Second World War and experienced the changing attitudes of the British for people not to know what to expect. One of the most elegant pieces of research that shows the emigrants' capacity to suppress knowledge was done by some French Caribbean scholars on the way in which the children of intending migrants displayed extensive knowledge of conditions in France which their parents claimed not to know. Some West Indians may have arrived with delusions as to what awaited them - but not as many as some people suggest.

Yet there were two main areas in which Britain was different, even special.

#### West Indians and Education in Britain

The first was education. This hardly arose elsewhere because being good colonials no-one believed that Spanish or Portuguese education was any good - so the migrants to Latin America and the Latin Caribbean did not consider this a problem. Attitudes to education in the USA were more complex: schools might be perceived as inferior to those in the Caribbean or British ones but the segregated African American Colleges provided higher education and jobs for West Indians. With British education there was the promise of something even better than what existed in the Caribbean. West Indians who came in the 1950s had often suffered from the lack of educational opportunities at home; the expansion of secondary schools would belong to the late 1950s and early 1960s. So they often hoped to educate themselves and had high expectations for their children. (This, rather than a former West Indian Commonwealth Secretary-General's disparaging remarks about migrants, reflects the truth about these immigrants' education). The promise of high class British education was not fulfilled. The youngest person among the *Windrush* migrants was Vince Reid (aged thirteen, 'scholar' as the passenger manifest noted). He remembered the mockery of his accent by his teacher and class; he also remembered gradually being accepted as bright but realising that he had attended a school, of the secondary modern type, that identified him as one of the losers.

In that one experience lies the prototype of the West Indian engagement with the British school system: disgraceful treatment and the failure by teachers to contemplate the possibility of West Indian success. Parents who had expected higher standards of education here than in the West Indies found that the schools failed their children. Part of the problem was that they were failing the native-born working class children; part of the problem was that the children were acquiring English working class, not West Indian working class, attitudes to education, and part was the difficulty parents found, working unsocial hours to support and guide their children. The initial reaction, a good West Indian one, was that the children were at fault. The problem was summed up by an American academic.

'No matter how bright they were, or how much potential they had, black students, living in integrated disadvantaged communities with the lower-class, white indigenous population, would probably end up not much different from their white working-class counterparts...' ( R.Giles, *The West Indian Experience in British Schools: Multiracial Education and Social Disadvantage in London* [Heinemann,1977]).

One way in which this was so proved to be attitudes to education, with boys more likely to consider it a waste of time than girls. Gradually the recognition grew that the schools were a problem. Parents founded supplementary schools; activists and later academic researchers from the West Indian community identified the areas of failure.

In the eighties there was a wonderful example of the parents' continued belief in education. A prominent Black British academic (not actually a West Indian though a number of activist West Indians were making similar statements) suggested to a meeting of West Indian parents that their children should be on the streets being politically active, rather than in the classroom being educated. Unsurprisingly he received short shrift from the parents.

The Scarman Report of 1981 noted that West Indian parents objected to the lack of discipline in schools, teachers' stereotyping of West Indians and failing to motivate them as students, lack of understanding of the students' cultural background, and the lack of sufficient contact between schools and parents. Scarman actually blamed the parents for the last problem but research done at the time showed that West Indian parents were more not less concerned about their children's schooling and did try to approach the schools as often as needed. In 1985 the Swann Report, *Education for All*, supported many of the main criticisms of the parents of the system. Whatever good it may have achieved disappeared in the baroque developments of the National Curriculum, the over-loading of the system with management techniques, and the belief in testing.

Maureen Stone's despairing words of 1981 probably still sum up the general attitude:

'As far as most West Indian parents and children were concerned, the schools do not even begin to offer anything like equal opportunity; they suffer all the disadvantages of the urban-working-class and the additional ones of prejudice and racism...it is widely believed...that all the most successful West Indians in this country were educated in the Caribbean, at least for most of their school life' (*The Education of the Black Child in Britain: The Myth of Multiracial Education* [Fontana,1981]).

The last statement is no longer true, or even perceived to be so, but there is a growing trend to send children back to the Caribbean for schooling.

### The Status of West Indians

Elsewhere when West Indians encountered racism or other difficulties British consuls or embassies intervened: they were British and due the protection of the British Crown. The 1948 Nationality Act confirmed that status. The experience of West Indians in Britain suggested otherwise. Relations with the police, landlords, and employers indicated that their right to live in Britain was questioned daily and that there was very little protection afforded to West Indian migrants in Britain. West Indians began to discuss amongst themselves their error in breaking one of the cardinal rules of English hospitality: invitations home were not meant to be accepted.

The consequence was that a sense of being West Indian, rather than of being from a particular territory, grew. From 1950, with the first test series victory by a West Indies cricket team in England, cricket provided a central focus for this sense of pride. The demonstrations (and the volume) of this pride alarmed some. Decorum was restored in Test Match grounds and Norman Tebbit would advance his famous cricket test of loyalty not noticing that with the appearance of Black footballers in the English side West Indians supported England at football and the West Indies at cricket. The children and grand-children proved to be more passionate about football than cricket.

The story had been one of confusion on both sides. A small, but increasing, number of West Indians by 1948 were not quite sure that they wanted to be British. In Britain they met people who with the Empire beginning to shrink were no longer sure what being British, an identity for so long bound up with the Empire, really meant. This confusing situation was new in West Indian migrations. Despite the recent successes of the Jamaican football team the issue has probably been settled where sporting loyalties are concerned. British athletics demonstrates that.

Partly because of this initial coolness the West Indian community in Britain suffered the loss through emigration, back to the Caribbean and to the USA and Canada, of its middle class members, the qualified, and entrepreneurs - for many years it appeared to be a decapitated community. In the USA the situation was quite different. There West Indians supplied a disproportionate number of the successful members of the black community; they tended to remain there. The failure to develop a business class in Britain was most apparent. The contrast with the immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, East Africa and even West Africa was striking. West Indians almost entirely worked for wages or salaries. In the 1970s and 1980s West Indian workers suffered first from links with declining industries and then with the public sector. West Indians appeared to be unsuccessful and trapped in Britain.

Yet it was in Britain, in fact in London, during the 1950s and 1960s that West Indian literature flourished. West Indian writers in London began to provide the literary evidence of the creativity of West Indian culture and definitions of West Indian nationality. Una Marson who had lived in London in the 1930s and 1940s provided the prototype of Caribbean Voices, the BBC programme which stimulated so many Caribbean writers in London and the Caribbean, though Henry Swanzy would be most closely identified with it. From the 1970s some of these writers would leave for North America or the Caribbean: Andrew Salkey to the USA, Sam Selvon to Canada, George Lamming back to the Caribbean. The London based Caribbean Artists' Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought many of these artists (and others) together. One West Indian writer, Sir Vidia Naipaul, has been wholly incorporated into the ranks of British writers, it seems, and West Indians remain a little ambivalent about that - less ambivalent would be the response to the recent suggestion that the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott be made Poet Laureate. That we would all resist. A younger generation of writers has already begun to

replace the losses through death and emigration.

The West Indian effect on British popular culture has been large. Claudia Jones helped to start the Notting Hill Carnival: despite the efforts of the bad-behaved, West Indians and the Metropolitan Police, this has survived and is allegedly Europe's largest street festival. Jamaican music, which replaced Trinidadian calypso and steel-band music, as the West Indian music has spread, often inescapably for those who do not like it, from the West Indian community to the wider society. Indeed, even at Carnival it has threatened the dominance of traditional calypso and steel-band music. The traditional avenues of sports and entertainment have also allowed a number of West Indians and their descendants to flourish.

#### A Summation

The history of West Indians in Britain over the last fifty years raises questions about the effect of migration on the Caribbean itself. The pressure of unemployment on Caribbean economies was relieved; remittances helped the family members who stayed behind; some people returned with money and skills. Ultimately the pressures for change were also relieved and governments began to rely on emigration to lessen the difficult economic problems facing the Caribbean territories. Long before mass emigration to Britain migration had become an integral part of West Indian economies. Britain for about a decade became part of the system and for longer functioned not as a destination but as the source of remittances.

What about West Indians in Britain? Some decide to return to the West Indies and return to Britain; some stay after their return. For the majority who stay here and whose children and grand-children (and great-grands) live here the times remain, as the Chinese curse has it, interesting. At the moment West Indians are perhaps becoming like African Americans: a community divided between the relatively successful middle class and a mass of people who continue to suffer deprivation. The challenge will be to bridge this gap. Despite a growing number of well-to-do and well-known West Indians the migration here might be best summed up by the closing words of a great nineteenth century novel:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

But I shall end with three statements recalling the beginning of this talk: the first the minimum claim of West Indians in this country; the second a rebuke of official indifference; the last a reminder, given that this has been the overture to three more substantial talks, not to trust historians:

We have done the state some service, and they know't;  
No more of that.

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#### A BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

There have been a number of books published this year. Of these the longest is Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (Harper Collins). Despite its title it concentrates on Afro-Caribbean people, contains fascinating interviews but is short on analysis. Tony Sewell *Keep on Moving: The Windrush Legacy: The Black Experience in Britain* (Voice Enterprises) is well illustrated and corrects the Phillips' omissions. Vivienne Francis *With Hope in Their Eyes: The Compelling Stories of the Windrush Generation* (Nia, X Press) follows the same pattern of the Phillips' volume and contains some interesting but often undated reproductions of newspaper articles. An earlier collection of oral histories is Thomas J. Cottle *Black Testimony: The Voices of Britain's West Indians* (Wildwood House, 1978). *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing About Black Britain* edited by Onyekachi Wambu (Victor Gollancz) presents a wide selection of West Indian and non-West Indian writers; the introduction is interesting. Of older books *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* edited by Winston James and Clive Harris (Verso, 1993) has an article by Steve Vertovec on the often neglected Indo-Caribbean migrants. Two local histories are worth consulting: Joan Anim-Addo *Longest Journey: A History of Black Lewisham* (Deptford Forum, 1995) and Mike and Charlie Phillips *Notting Hill in the Sixties* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1997). *The Caribbean in Europe: Aspects of the West Indian Experience in Britain, France and the Netherlands*, edited by Colin Brock (Frank Cass, 1986) provides some history and comparative information though it is mostly on Britain. *Lost Illusions: Caribbean Minorities in Britain and the Netherlands*, edited by Malcolm Cross and Han Entzinger (Routledge, 1988) is comparative. Two books edited in the United States provide historical and comparative perspectives: *The Caribbean Exodus* edited by Barry B. Levine (Praeger, 1987) and *In Search of a Better Life: Perspectives on Migration from the Caribbean*, edited by Ransford W. Palmer (Praeger, 1990). The two official reports mentioned are *The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April 1981* (HMSO, 1981), also published by Penguin, (the Scarman Report) and *Education for All: The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* (HMSO, 1985) -the Swann Report.

