

30 November 1998

**Some Stay and Some Return:**

**Caribbean Migration Outcomes**

Dr. Margaret Byron

Introduction

In discussing migration outcomes one could launch directly into discussion of the migration trajectories of a sample of migrants. Such an account would be rich with details of the migration experience of individuals and very valuable in its own right. In this lecture, I examine some possible outcomes of the post-war Caribbean migration to Britain by reviewing migration profiles of a small sample of Caribbean migrants. In addition, though, I include some elements of the wider historical, socio-economic context of the migration process. It is thus possible to see how migrants came to migrate to Britain, to begin to understand the origins of their goal systems, and to recognise how those goal systems have altered over the last 35 or more years. Fifty years since the *Empire Windrush’s* arrival signalled the start of Caribbean labour migration to Britain, this lecture examines how the migration has worked out for some individuals in the migration stream.

Caribbean Migration: Structure and Agency

In earlier work on the post-war migration from the Caribbean to Britain (Byron, 1994) I referred to the work of scholars who emphasised structural factors which have impacted upon Caribbean societies, inducing and perpetuating labour migration flows. Wolf (1982) succinctly poses this point: capitalism has generally found labourers when and where it needed them, and migratory movements have carried labour power to markets all across the globe (Wolf, 1982, 361).

As do Watson (1982), Nikolinakos (1975), Harris (1987) and Cohen (1987), Wood (1982, 302) favours a conceptualisation of migration as a ‘macro-social process’ as opposed to the decision-making of individual migrants. Labour migration is one aspect of the increased internationalisation of the circuits of capital since WWII (Sassen, 1988; Watson, 1982). Labour power has reflected this in becoming an increasingly international commodity. Within the world economy, labour flows indicate growing polarity between the ‘core’ labour importing countries and the sending regions. Harris (1987) joins others in directing attention to the ways in which supplies of cheap labour are released in a particular context. In the case of the twentieth century Caribbean, as capital withdrew from a significant proportion of the sugar industry due to diminishing profits, a large part of the agrarian population was released from agrarian occupations. In the absence of alternative, labour-intensive, industrial development, migration was often the only perceived option for many.

Within this historical-structural framework certain factors/actors emerge as critical to the migration process. The location and type of capital investment is a determining factor in the process of labour migration as is the political and economic relationship between countries within the global economy. Linked to this is the decision-making role of the state in the labour-importing country. Cohen (1987) identifies the latter as the most important ‘actor’ in the process, determining whether and in what numbers migrants may cross its borders. This state also decides how long a particular migration may last and under what conditions the migrants exist within its borders.

I argue that equally important to understanding the migration process is a focus on the migrants who make up these large-scale flows of labour around the globe. While those who analyse the roles of particular macro-structures argue that they explain the existence of labour flows, a comprehensive and incisive study would also investigate how individuals become part of such streams. Indeed such analyses can also reveal how migration is developed and perpetuated as a livelihood strategy at the level of individual migrants and their communities (Wood, 1982).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to including both the historical-structural and the micro-scale agency approaches to migration in one research project is linking the two theoretical and, hence, methodological levels. In many ways this explains the relative dearth of integrated studies of this process. I find that in studying migrant goals and outcomes there is the possibility of linking developments at the micro-level to structural change at the macro level. A proposed middle link which I discussed at greater length in an earlier study (Byron, 1994) is the notion of ‘migrant, or migration, ideology’. Two rather different applications of the term ideology emerged as I investigated it.

Rhoades (1978), when examining intra-European migrations between 1870 and 1970, concurs with the historical structural analyses mentioned above in concluding: ‘migration ideology is formulated by West European employers and governments to justify and maintain a migratory labour system’. Philpott’s (1968) study of migration to Britain from Montserrat defines it as: ‘the cognitive model which the migrant holds as to the nature and goals of his migration’. This places central importance on the individual migrant. ‘Ideology’ is the common factor in these two different and, indeed, intellectually opposed models. The challenge here is to explain how the former ‘ideology’ becomes incorporated into the latter and, later, is perpetuated within migrant societies apparently independently of the receiving employers and states.

When migrants’ goals and explanations of migration are analysed it is clear that the labour needs of the wider global economy have been incorporated into migrant survival strategies. In many ‘sending’ countries migration has become a key option in household/family economic options. In the case of the post-emancipation Caribbean, migration is the most widespread socio-economic process. Indeed it has contributed more to regional unity than perhaps any other factor as labour migrants, coming from various territories met up on the ‘neutral ground’ of the destination. The national, regional and global economies have decisive impacts on individual migration trajectories. A large part of this paper examines a series of migration outcomes. These are broadly classified into those who’ve decided to, or are likely to remain in Britain and those who have returned to the Caribbean. Before looking at the case studies however, the issue of migrant goals and the decision to stay or return will be discussed. Much of my research has involved in-depth discussions with migrants in Britain and those who have returned to the Caribbean to ascertain what the components of these goal systems are. The role of macro-structures in determining the outcomes for migrants is both profound and, at times, less than evident. Uncovering both ‘levels’ of the process aids the understanding of migration more generally.

The Migration

The 50th anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is a propitious time to focus on the outcomes of the migration which was heralded by the docking of this ship in 1948 bringing around 500 British Caribbean citizens. In fact, the migration from the Caribbean really gathered momentum in the mid 1950s and peaked at the start of the 1960s. Given that the modal age group of the migrants at this time was 19-24 years, now, 40 years or more on, the majority of Caribbean migrants are near or have reached retirement. Retirement is a particularly decisive moment for labour migrants as, at this point, in many senses their *raison d’être* in the ‘destination country’ ceases to be. This may literally be the case for recruited labour. In many cases, Caribbean migrants in Britain are examples, it accelerates the decision on where to spend the retirement.

The presence of significant numbers of Caribbean-born, labour migrants in Britain is primarily a post-war phenomenon. It was triggered by the movement of several thousand volunteers from the British colonies in the Caribbean to serve in the armed forces or work in munitions factories in Britain (Patterson, 1963). Their return to the Caribbean after the war led to disillusion with the stagnant or declining economies of the colonies. This, coupled with the evidence of labour shortages they had witnessed in Britain, led many of this group of returnees to make a second voyage to Britain in search of civilian employment (Richmond, 1954; Davison, 1962; Lambeth Borough Council, 1988). These pioneer labour migrants were followed by relatives and friends in a classic case of chain migration (Macdonald and Macdonald, 1964; Byron, 1994). Their status as citizens of the UK and Colonies meant that they had entry to and right of abode in Britain.

Formal recruitment of labour in the Caribbean by British concerns occurred on a relatively small scale and focused on one territory in the region. State controlled transport and health services in Britain and hotels and restaurants in the private sector co-operated with the government of Barbados in the recruitment of workers from that island (Davison, 1962; Hind, 1966). Like the post-war return to Britain of many Caribbean volunteers, this recruitment provided a source of information for potential migrants on opportunities abroad. This filtered down to many who were directly involved in neither of these specific flows (Byron, 1994).

Table 1

The Caribbean-born population in Britain 1951-1991

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Year | Population |
| 1951 | 17,218 |
| 1961 | 173,659 |
| 1971 | 304,070 |
| 1981 | 295,179 |
| 1991 | 264,519 |

Source: Census of Great Britain, OPCS, 1953-1993.

The Caribbean-born population in Britain grew from 17,218 in 1951 to peak at 304,070 in 1971 (Table 1). In the two decades since then this population has decreased in size to 295,179 in 1981 and to 264,519 in 1991 as a result of a growing out-migration from Britain and a greatly reduced in-migration from the Caribbean. This dwindling in-migration from the Caribbean was the result of the imposition of immigration restrictions in Britain and the progressive withdrawal of British citizenship rights from potential migrants in the British colonies in the Caribbean territories commencing with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act (Peach, 1968; Byron 1994).

Between 1981 and 1991, allowing for mortality of approximately 3,600 (Britton, 1990), it appears that a decline of 26,988 in the Caribbean-born population was due to out-migration from Britain. The rising returnee populations in the various Commonwealth Caribbean territories are evidence that the majority of these migrants have returned to the Caribbean. At the 1991 Commonwealth Caribbean Population and Housing Census, there were 11,146 returnees from Britain in the Eastern Caribbean islands[[1]](#endnote-1) alone Caribbean Community Regional Census Office, 1994). The rate of return is also increasing. In Barbados, where return migrants from Britain made up 44 per cent of the returnee population, the annual rate of return[[2]](#endnote-2) has almost doubled over the twenty year period between 1970 and 1989 from 230 to 437 returnees per year (Caribbean Community Regional Census Office, 1994).

An ageing Caribbean-born Population in Britain

Over the past 40 years the 19-24 age cohort which accounted for the majority of the migrant Caribbean population in Britain in 1961 has aged and is now at, or within ten years of, retirement. Figure 1 illustrates the Caribbean-born population's progression through the various age groups over this time period. In 1991 the pensionable sector, which was less than one per cent in 1961, comprised 11 per cent of the population. Relative to the other age groups, there has been a disproportionately high return to the Caribbean from among this age group of migrants. Meanwhile the 15-44 age group has steadily decreased from over 80 per cent in 1961 to under 40 per cent in 1991 as the cohort shifted into the older groups which now account for over half of the Caribbean-born group. By the year 2001 all surviving members of the 45-64 cohort in 1981 (Figure 1) will have reached a pensionable age, tripling the 1991 figures for the Caribbean-born pensioner population should they remain in Britain. Alternatively, the stream of return migrants could be swollen by members of this newly retired group.

Return migration

A low level of return migration to the Caribbean has been occurring since the early stages of the labour movement to Britain (Davison, 1968; Patterson, 1968; Brooks, 1969). Research has demonstrated that the vast majority of Caribbean migrants to Britain intended a relatively short stay of around five years (Gmelch, 1992; Byron, 1994; Byron and Condon, 1996). The census figures in Table 1 show that this mass return after a five year sojourn did not occur: the majority of the migrants remain in Britain. A combination of relatively low incomes, high rents, youthful and gender balanced demographic structure of the migrant group and consequent family formation ended plans for an early return. By the end of the 1960s, for most migrants, the focus had become making a living to support a young family in Britain while retaining a material commitment to relatives who remained in the Caribbean. Given that the majority of Caribbean-born people in Britain thus became 'long-stay migrants', it is likely that the majority of returnees would opt to go back at retirement as this would ensure an income from their British pensions upon their return.

Two other migration outcomes are also important considerations. First, it appears that many Caribbean pensioners will spend their retirement in Britain. Secondly, a significant proportion of the returnees are of pre-retirement ages and are economically active in the Caribbean (Nutter, 1986; Gmelch, 1992; Byron, 1994). Important variables in the migrant decision-making process, which leads to the above outcomes, are examined in the subsequent section.

Migrant goals

Caribbean history can be described as a history of migration. This has had a profound effect on the self-conceptualisation of individuals and in their goal construction. It also impacts on the resource systems of individuals and households. Within the region, migration parallels education and success in business as routes to improved socio-economic status of the individual and family (Patterson, 1978). One of my earliest observations in my migration research in the late 1980s was the vital importance of goal systems and how adaptable the migrant had to be in the face of socio-economic realities.

Post-war migration to Britain was the latest movement in a continuum of labour migration in post-emancipation Caribbean societies (Thomas-Hope, 1978; Richardson, 1992; Byron, 1994). For small islanders of the Leewards, post-emancipation labour migrations to the large sugar plantations of the southern Caribbean were followed by later movement to similar employment in the Dominican Republic and Cuba at the turn of the century. In the early 1900s ships trading with the eastern seaboard of the US became a source of transport for adventurous migrants and thus established small groups of islanders in the cities of the Eastern USA. The construction of a dry dock in Bermuda attracted some of these US bound migrants and these were then the contact point for further migration from the Leewards into the tiny but prosperous colony. The pre-UK labour movements were completed by recruited migration to the US by the US department of agriculture, a small movement to serve sugar plantations and construction industry of the USVI and migration to work in the oil refineries and related industry in the Netherlands Antilles. The migration details of other islands differed slightly with thousands of Jamaicans and also Windward islanders, Barbadians and Trinidadians migrating to Central America as labour for the construction industry in the late nineteenth century.

To potential migrants, Britain became the latest opportunity to use migration to improve socio-economic status. By this time migration had become institutionalised within Caribbean territories with depressed plantation economies and, consequently, under-employed populations. In-depth discussions with migrants in Britain and the Caribbean revealed that this information and experience had been accumulated by migrants and processed into a complex system of migration information. Destinations were evaluated in terms of proximity, prosperity of returning migrants and quality of life they offered. Meanwhile, the state at the destination determined which destinations were available to migrants at a particular time as is illustrated in the following excerpt:

I liked Florida, would have loved to return there. First they took you on a six months contract and then you had the option of leaving or renewing the contract. They watched you and you didn’t get to stay long enough to ‘come a citizen’. I was sent home in 1952. I wanted to go back but their doctor said I failed my medical. So I returned to farming in Nevis. I grew cotton on 5 acres. In 1957 the drought was terrible and I looked for a way out. England was open. You know, I used to say that if England was outside the front door, I’d climb out the back window rather than go there. As it turned out, it was the only place letting me in, so I came here!

Here, the interaction of macro-scale structural factors, particularly that of the US government, with the migrant decision making process emerges. Which migration flow the migrant joined was to a large extent beyond the power of the individual migrant or his/her family. Within these strictures, though, migrants placed time limits on their trips and planned potential achievements from their migration. These were based on evidence from past migrations, perceived needs of the migrant and his/her household and the age and status of the migrant. They constituted the package of goals which the migrant took to Britain and which provided a major theme, albeit, as I shall discuss, a shrinking one, for their sojourn here.

A major objective of the migration was to be ready for a return within five and at most ten years. In a survey of over 100 migrants from the Leeward island of Nevis who lived in Leicester, 50 per cent placed a time limit on their migration when leaving the island. The majority, over 80 per cent, thought that they would be home in five years.

We came to make a few pennies and go back, we didn’t think it would take long. People used to say “five years and we come back” when they were leaving. We left the children as we thought we would soon return to them. Now we have been here for 30 years…

As their original plans did not materialise, migrants had to be increasingly adaptable and alter their goals accordingly. Many of those who had left children in the Caribbean began to seek larger accommodation and to save for the passages of the children to Britain. As a commitment to remit money to relatives in the Caribbean remained, many found their plans of saving for an early return increasingly thwarted. Their wages were relatively low and could not cover all the demands on them. Gradually their lives in Britain came to demand most of their attention and income. This process was accelerated due to the demography of the migrant population. The average age was mid-twenties and it was a gender-balanced group. By the mid 1960s marriage and young families dominated the lives of Caribbean migrants.

Despite the changes, few migrants dismissed the goal of return: it was postponed. By then, migrants were aware of British pension schemes and many were paying into supplementary funds. A return at retirement was the most secure return-option as an income would be guaranteed. Goals had to shift from five years to a gradual realisation that a return at retirement was the most likely scenario. While macro- and micro-scale forces determined the non-realisation of initial goals, the adaptability of the individuals is evident as new return targets were formed. As time passed, however, a variety of forces impacted on the migrant goal system. A young, largely British-born nuclear family, a social network that included a local English component. Indeed, some Caribbean migrants had English spouses. By the 1980s many migrants had spent a greater part of their lives in Britain than in the land of their birth.

My recent work on the Caribbean migration process, (Byron and Condon, 1996; Byron, 1999) has focused on the present stage/state of the migration. While return dominates as the current dynamic stage of the process, the networked position of many of migrants who have no plans to physically move back to the Caribbean to reside proves a fascinating study also. The rest of this lecture will discuss three categories of migration outcomes that I have observed.

Pre-retirement Returnees

When data from the 1991 Commonwealth Caribbean census is analysed it is evident that a significant proportion of the returnee population in the Caribbean returned prior to retirement. During the late 1980s in researching return to one territory in the Caribbean I found that return migrants from England fell quite neatly into two categories: those who had spent under 15 years in Britain and those who had been there much longer, in some cases over 30 years. The following two profiles are of short term migrants who returned within 14 years.

Mr David went to Britain in 1955 and settled in Leicester. He was in his early forties and the purpose of his migration was very specific. He wanted a chance to earn ‘proper money’ so that he could improve the standard of living at home. He had 6 children and wanted to bring most of them over to Britain and see them settled before he left. Four of these children joined him in Leicester. The youngest of these was 16. He was able to live a fairly frugal life in Britain, first sharing a room in a lodging house and then renting a room in the home of one of his children (all of whom were married with young families by the time he left Britain). He returned to Nevis at the end of the 1960s having achieved his aims. He was able to improve his home in his village of origin significantly with his savings. One of the obvious additions was his water cistern, which provided a regular domestic water supply:

See that cistern, is England money build that. ‘Hoe and fork work’ could never make that possible.

Mr David had worked in an engineering factory in Leicester as unskilled labour. When he left Leicester there was still ‘plenty of work’. He left because he had had enough of the British winters and he had made some savings. His children were settled and he had a home in Nevis to return to. He returned to his pre-migration occupation of small farming, ‘hoe and fork work’, though on a smaller scale than before. A few years later he qualified for a small pension from his contributions while in Britain. He was able to fit back into the home society fairly easily due to a relatively short period abroad. His age at migration, and the stage of the life cycle he had reached minimised the likelihood of him developing long-term commitments in Britain. He was effectively free to leave once his children had settled into life in Leicester. Economically, there was no shortage of low skilled industrial employment in the city and he left before large scale redundancies occurred in the city’s manufacturing sector during the structural changes in British industry. Mr David’s case is one of the migration trajectories which mirrored the initial goals most closely.

Mrs Elias went to Britain in 1960. She was in her forties. She migrated first to Ipswich and after 3 months, because ‘no work was going in Ipswich, she moved to Manchester. There, she worked in a cotton mill and later a ‘bread factory’ for 11 years. Her initial plans of working for 5 years to save money and improve the standard of living of her household in Nevis (Mrs Elias, her mother and a young child she had fostered when her mother died) soon altered. She found that remittances to her mother and her expenses in Britain left her with quite small savings monthly. The very poor accommodation available for migrants to rent meant that she soon decided to invest her savings in purchasing a small house. She let rooms to her best friend and her husband to cover mortgage expenses.

After five years in Manchester, Mrs Elias decided that a return at that point was not a practical move. In Nevis there was little work and she had over ten years to go before she could retire and qualify for a pension.

You see, you could work there (England) and me, I spend some of my earnings buying a house and I thought all along that I would not spend my old days there. So what I saved I used to make my property here. So when I had to leave there, most of what was here for me, I get it from there. Because you have bills to pay, taxes to pay in Nevis but you cannot get a job, even to work hoe, you cannot get a job then. Because in Nevis, no help is here, especially for the poorer class. To me, England is a help. England is a help to many of us who was shabby in life... You secure money. You don’t go to spree. You go to work for money to improve your condition back home.

She altered her plans for an early return and decided to remain in Britain until she retired.

I never plan to come back so early (11 years and 5 months). I plan to stay until my pension is due. But my mother send to call me because she is getting down in age and have nobody to care for her. She only had one leg by then and needed a lot of help. So I said OK and pack up and come home. I don’t regret it. You know the older you get the more you feel the cold. So, I get out in good time!

She planned to work in Britain until retirement and to return with a pension. However, after 11 years her mother became ill and she returned to care for her. She had purchased a house in Manchester and she was able to sell this prior to leaving. She also took her savings with her. She returned to living in her mother’s house which, together with a small piece of land, she subsequently inherited. She extended the house and built a water cistern adjacent to it. From the late 1970s she worked as a gardener for an expatriate family. In addition she farmed her small land holding and sold any excess in the local market. She was content with her lifestyle, valued her time in Britain and had her foster daughter and her five ‘grandchildren’ to keep her company and busy.

Long-term Migrants

This category includes both retired returnees and those who for a variety of reasons returned within their working lives. The length of time spent abroad is a very important factor in assessing the experience of returnees and in attempting to interpret the forces which are involved in migrant decision making. Without exception, the returnees who had spent less than 14 years in Britain spoke of an easy readjustment to life in the Caribbean. They were well received by the home society. It was clear that less was expected of them. This included self-expectation and what the society had come to expect of migrants who had spent long periods away. The ideology which runs through this migration process has a large impact on return decisions. Success as a migrant is demonstrated by building an impressive modern house, usually having a car and generally living a comfortable, modern lifestyle. There is therefore much more pressure on migrants who have spent thirty years or more in Britain to conform to such expectations.

Analysis of the current returnee population in the eastern Caribbean (CCPHC) shows that in 1991 a majority of returnees in several of the islands were pre-retirement. My field work in Nevis and preliminary study in Barbados also showed this trend. Clearly, large-scale retirement return is yet to peak and, not surprisingly, return to date has to some extent reflected the age-structure of the Caribbean-born population in Britain. Long-term, pre-retirement returnees generally return to engage in economic activity. I have encountered a range of activities with most falling into the service sector of the economy. While a minority of returnees practice skills learnt in Britain the majority operate small retail, restaurant, guest house, transport or real estate businesses which they invested their savings in on their return. The growing tourism industry has provided opportunities previously unavailable to returnees.

Mr and Mrs Prentice went to Britain in 1960 and 1961 respectively. They married after going to Britain. Mrs Prentice left their baby daughter with her family in Nevis. They thought that they would be home in five years but then:

Start making family ... well, I say it doesn’t make any sense for me to go back now, I haven’t got anything to go back to. So we sent for the first child and we stayed on to see all three of them grow up. After they grown up I said OK, I think I can now go back and build. So I came out in 1977 and looked at the land they bought for me back home in 1976. I said OK, I can build a house on it, could have built two on it! So I went back to St. Albans and worked towards this. I did not bank my money in England, I banked it here in Nevis through transfers whenever the value of the pound is good. I went out in 1980 and spent four months with a team of builders to complete my house. I did all the plumbing and wiring myself.

During his 28 years in Britain Mr Prentice went to college at night for two years and qualified in electrical wiring. When I interviewed the couple in 1988 they had been back for 4 months. He was working as a electrical contractor and she was working on finishing the house and occasionally assisted him with jobs. She had worked in the Marconi firm in Britain and had some electrical engineering experience. They also had a small retail business where they sold a variety of electrical fittings.

They both had close relatives in the Caribbean who welcomed them back. They provided a good support system. Mrs Prentice spoke at length about her children and grandchildren who all remained in Britain. She clearly thought of them often and wished that they could be in Nevis with her. She had even considered taking some of the grandchildren with her to Nevis: “but you just can’t take them like that, The parents have to want them to come”.

Although she clearly saw many benefits in living back in the Caribbean, ranging from health issues to having her siblings nearby, Mrs Prentice was clearly torn between her offspring in Britain and her new home and extended family in Nevis. Mr Prentice was more settled and content with the move.

It may sound a bit morbid but I fancy myself back here to be buried. My children are all grown up. I don’t want to stay in the cold. To have get up every morning to go to work in that freezing weather. Out here now, if we feel like getting up we do or just do nothing. Also, I think that I have something to offer, even to one person in Nevis (Mr. Prentice).

The couple were subsequently joined by their youngest daughter and her three children. In the 1990s Mr Prentice opened a club in a building he constructed on their land further varying his income options.

Although the time scale of this migration changed and the period in Britain became more complicated as raising a family interrupted their focus on a prosperous return, central to their lives in Britain was clearly their intention to return to Nevis.

Mr Wade migrated to Britain from Barbados in 1954. He was 21. He does not recall having a time limit on the trip. He did intend to complete training for a profession prior to returning and he always anticipated a return. Twelve years after migrating to Britain he returned to Barbados on holiday and after that he made this trip every two years. He trained as a State registered nurse and later qualified as a nursing manager. He worked in Manchester and later moved to a post in north London. He returned to Barbados in 1984.

In Barbados he is the manager of two nursing homes. While attaining his goal of contributing to socio-economic life of Barbados he finds the conditions less easy to work in.

When contemplating a return, his prime considerations were his employment, his ageing parents and his wish to contribute something to the home country. At times he considered remaining in Britain:  
‘I regarded Britain as home too. After all I spent most of my adult years there’. His return was precipitated by the terminal illness of his father and consequent needs of his ailing, elderly mother. His second wife and young son accompanied him to Barbados and she works as a nurse there.

Reconsidering the move he thinks that, apart from doing his duty to his parents, he would prefer to have remained in Britain. He feels that he got to the top of his profession there.

Despite attaining the goals he left with, this migrant found that his direction altered while in Britain and he could easily have remained there permanently. His strong ties to his parents were the deciding factor in the end.

Redundancy accelerated returns

The impact of fluctuations in the British economy was evident in the migration histories of these migrants. While most agreed that work was in abundance when they arrived in Britain, a lack of work often spurred their departure. The following two case studies are migrants who planned a return at retirement. However, redundancy at a late stage in their working lives led them to return earlier.

Mr Martin, his wife and two daughters of 11 and 13 years moved back to Nevis in 1992.

In England, Leeds, he worked as a mason in the building trade. He was in his late 50s at the start of the 1990s and he found it increasingly difficult to get steady employment. ‘Jobs were getting scarce. Always intended to return but after work was slackening up I came home.’

In preparation for an eventual return he had come home for long breaks on two occasions and built two houses on land he owned. He had inherited family land and had purchased another lot in a prime location in the 1960s. He lived in one of these houses with his wife and daughters and rented the other out. He also farmed a small plot of land, growing vegetables.

Keeping the goal of return central was not easy. The Martins had 6 children had to work hard to support them and pay their mortgage. Mrs Martin worked in a range of jobs from tailoring factories to hospitals as nursing auxiliary.

Jobs were easy to get but wages were small.

Bringing their two last children with them eased the separation from the four children and seven grandchildren who remained in Britain. We always wanted to return and as there was a home here for us we decided to make the move then.

Mr Thomas was 62 when he returned to Nevis in 1994. He had lived in Leeds for 38 years for most of which he had worked for British Rail as porter, shunter and platform guard. He always planned a return. However, like many other migrants he married and a young family precluded an early move back to Nevis.

He later divorced and the lack of ties in Britain left him focused more directly on returning to Nevis. In the early 1990s British Rail offered voluntary redundancy to some of their staff and he accepted.

For me it was a lot of money. I had paid for my house in Leeds long before so I found myself with plenty cash in hand. I always planned to go home but this made it happen early!

His father left him land and he built a large house on it after returning.

Now I have a comfortable life here and I do vegetable gardening to keep me busy.

While there are clearly a variety of cases of pre-retirement return, the large increase in the coming decade will be in the flow of retired people back to the Caribbean. The following two case studies are from this group.

Mr and Mrs Hobson were in their early thirties when they migrated from Barbados to London in 1955. They left their two young sons with relatives in Barbados. He was recruited to work for London Transport and remained with the company until he was offered early retirement in 1981. When he realised that their return was not imminent - his wife was pregnant and they were struggling to save funds - he worked on getting their two sons over to London. These children and the son born in London were raised in Britain.

Mrs Hobson had a much more varied employment history than her husband. This was due to fitting work in with child-care and to seeking better remuneration for her labour. She first cleaned British Rail trains, then did child minding while her last child was young, then worked in the catering industry, then as a hospital orderly and finally worked in the Lyons coffee factory. Her range of employment experience was typical of the employment histories of female Caribbean migrants in Britain.

The Hobsons planned to return at retirement but changes in Mr Hobson’s employment status at London Transport brought forward the move. They had family land in a popular location in Barbados and built there on their return. The two sons who were born in Barbados also subsequently returned there and both had good jobs in the business and finance sector at the time of this research.

The Hobsons had a comfortable lifestyle in Barbados. He was satisfied with the move but Mrs Hobson found the society unwelcoming. She now regretted the return as her only friends were a few other returnees.

Mr and Mrs Liburd returned to Nevis in 1994. They had been in Leeds, England, for 39 and 38 years respectively. They left two adult children and two grandchildren there. Mr Liburd worked for a short time in a foundry, then in the construction industry for over twenty years and for the last ten years worked for a mini cab firm. He had retired a year before returning. Mrs Liburd was not yet pensionable but was not working due to ill health. She had worked in the tailoring industry for the first ten years and then as a cleaner in hospitals and the polytechnic.

Like many of the other migrants in this sample, the Liburds had to alter initial goals of returning after a relatively short period in Britain. They focused on preparing for a later return. In the early 1960s they bought land in Nevis on which they would build more than twenty years later. They thus avoided the considerable increase in land prices over the next three decades.

We always intended to return here, to retire. In fact we even asked that our bodies should be sent home if we died there. We go back to England, you know, for holidays and that. To see the children and grandchildren and to go to the pub! (Mr Liburd).

Mrs Liburd’s 84 year old mother is still alive in Nevis. This was one important reason for returning. They were able to realise their promise to the ‘old folks’ to return while they were still alive. They had kept alive their goal of returning to Nevis throughout their long stay abroad. They led a quiet, comfortable life as pensioners. They had a smallholding with a few animals and one acre of crops. Despite expressing a deep disappointment in the poor reception they have received from the Nevisian society, they are pleased that they came back. ‘You see, home is home. We always wanted to come back and, all in all, conditions are much improved on what we left in the 1950s’ (Mr Liburd).

The third category of outcomes I wish to refer to here is that of those who will remain resident in Britain. This is by no means a homogenous group. I included people who have made a conscious choice not to return to the Caribbean or those who would return but do not have the resources to do so. For simplicity in this lecture I will also include those who have prepared for residence in the Caribbean by building property there but who prefer to remain based in Britain regularly visiting the Caribbean.

We will go when we win the pools (Nevisian in Leicester).

Condon and I (1996) have discussed at some length a number of economic and socio-cultural factors which are involved in the decisions facing migrants considering a return. Several returnees in the Caribbean referred to those who ‘could not return’. A Barbadian returnee made several references to people who ‘did not do their homework and now had to spend their elderly years in England’. Another returnee, in Nevis, noted that ‘it have people up there now willing to get out but cannot get out. Because the passage is so dear and they don’t save’. When the low wages, high rents and growing families of the Caribbean migrant generation are considered, it is actually quite remarkable that most of the returns which have occurred materialised at all. Clearly the goal system was a very important guide to their lifestyle while in Britain.

In our research on return from Britain and France to the Caribbean we found that economic factors played a major role. In the Caribbean real estate prices have rocketed over the past two decades and are in most cases beyond the imagination of those who left the region before 1965. This factor favours potential returnees who purchased land or homes during the period prior to 1980 or who inherited property. The issue of cost of property is complicated by the image of a successful returnee that pervades the Caribbean and which informed the package of goals carried by the migrants. Holidays in the Caribbean have reinforced the image of a returnee with a large, modern home. Few who feel unable to achieve this would consider a more modest return.

I learn from those who went to Santo Domingo and come back with nothing. One man in our village came back because his canefields shut down. He had one sack on his back with a machete and a pair of overalls. He had to live with his sister, who he never write to all them years (Nevisian migrant in Leicester).

So, while the majority of a sample of migrants in Britain would indicate an intention to return to the Caribbean, less than half of these may have the material resources to make this a reality. In Britain, factors such as job type, tenure category (Peach and Byron, 1993; 1994) and the state of the housing market at the time of sale (Karn *et al*., 1986) could be instrumental in determining whose goals of an eventual return are met.

For many other Caribbean migrants in Britain the question of where to spend their retirement is a more complex one. Migration goals on leaving the Caribbean inevitably altered and became less central as time passed, and life in Britain, albeit within a relocated Caribbean community, became the norm. A comment, even common among returnees is that they have spent more years in England than actually living in the Caribbean. Culturally and socially, Britain has become a way of life for many.

I go back for holidays but I could not live there. My children and grandchildren are here, my church is here, my friends are here.... (Barbadian woman in London).

An elderly man in Leicester who had not been back in thirty five years said to me: ‘I hear that most people have flush toilets there now. But, I don’t think that I will ever go and find out if that is true. I am settled here now’.

Others seemed to admit a sort of inertia. Retirement had come but uprooting to return in their sixties seemed too much effort for many. In addition there was too much uncertainty. How would the health services compare to what they were used to here. Were the tales of poor welcomes from the ‘home society’, true? How would they cope without their children and grandchildren who remained in England? Likewise, how would their children cope without their help. Many were content with regular visits to relatives and friends in the Caribbean. The following case seems to sum up many of these situations.

Mr and Mrs Parry have been in Manchester since 1958. They live within five minutes walking distance from Mrs Parry’s sister. They own their house, and 23 years ago they built a three-bedroom bungalow on land they had purchased in Nevis. Mrs Parry has had two trunks packed full of items for Nevis for almost twenty years. They are both retired and spend their days minding the grandchildren of Mrs Parry’s sister while their mothers work. The packed trunks and the house in Nevis represent the return goal. They are in constant touch with close relatives in Nevis and regularly send money and other gifts. They make visits every three or four years. But a return would mean an almost unthinkable separation from their local network in Manchester.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Migration outcomes is a very useful way of encompassing the variety of possible developments in the trajectories of Caribbean migrants. I find inadequate the dichotomy of successful returnees versus those who do not realise this goal. While goal systems are an important focus in migration research, their dynamic nature is perhaps the most interesting element of them. The flexibility of Caribbean migrants emerges clearly here. Up to 50 years on, a permanent resettlement in the Caribbean would be an unsatisfactory move for many. Yet there were few migrants who seemed out of touch with the Caribbean, indeed most were more linked into the region than they had ever been in the 1960s. Modern communication systems and a firmly established Caribbean network in Britain has rendered a return to the Caribbean just one of a range of possibilities for Caribbean migrants.

Throughout these profiles of migrants there has been evidence of the enormous resolve with which migrants followed and often realised their plans. The origin of such goals in the Caribbean societies they left is evident in the economic history of the region. There is much scope for further analysis of such goal systems in the light of past economic history and contemporary structural developments in the sending and receiving locations.

© Margaret Byron 1998

References

Britton, M. (1990) *Mortality and geography: a review in the mid 1980s*, HMSO, London.

Brookes, D. (1969) ‘Who will go back?’ *Race Today*, September, 132-134.

Byron, M. (1994) *Post-war Caribbean migration to Britain: the unfinished cycle*, Avebury, Aldershot.

Byron, M. and Condon, S. (1996) 'A comparative study of Caribbean return migration: towards a context-dependent explanation', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21, pp. 91-104.

Byron, M. (1998) ‘Migration, work and gender’, in Chamberlain, M*. Globalised identities,* Routledge, London, forthcoming.

Caribbean Community Regional Census Office (1994) *Commonwealth Caribbean Population and Housing Census*, 1991, Caribbean Community Regional Census Office: Trinidad. (CCPHC)

Cohen, R. (1987) *The new helots: migrants in the international division of labour*, Gower, Aldershot.

Davison, B. (1968), 'No place back home: a study of Jamaicans returning to Kingston, Jamaica', *Race*, 9 (4), pp. 499-509.

Gmelch, G. (1992), *Double passage: the lives of Caribbean migrants abroad and back home*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

Harris, C. (1987) ‘British capitalism, migration and relative surplus population: a synopsis’, *Migration* 1 (1) pp.47-90.

Hind, D. (1966), *Journey to an illusion*, Heinemann, London.

Karn, V. Kemeny, J. and Williams, P. (1986), 'Low income home ownership in the inner city', in Booth, P. and Crook, T. (eds.), *Low cost home ownership*, Gower, Aldershot, pp. 149-169.

London Borough of Lambeth (1988), *Forty winters on*, Lambeth Borough Council, London.

Newton, V. (1984), *The silver men: West Indian Labour migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

Nutter, R. D.(1986) ‘Implications of return migration for economic development in Kingston, Jamaica’, in King, R. L. (ed.) *Return migration and economic development*, Croom Helm, London.

Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) (1993) *1991 Census, Ethnic group and Country of birth, Great Britain*, HMSO, London.

Patterson, S. (1963) *Dark strangers: a study of West Indians in London*, Tavistock, London.

Patterson, H. O. (1969) ‘West Indian migrants returning home; some observations’, *Race*, 10 (1) pp. 69-77.

Peach, C. and Byron, M. (1993) ‘Caribbean tenants in council housing: ‘Race’, class and gender’, *New Community*, 19 (3) pp. 407-23.

Peach, C. and Byron, M. (1994) ‘Council house sales, Residualisation and Afro-Caribbean tenants’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 23 (3) pp. 363-383.

Philpott, S. B. (1973) *West Indian migration: the Montserrat case*, Athlone press, London.

Richardson, B.C. (1980), 'Freedom and migration in the Leeward Caribbean, 1838-48', *Journal of Historical Geography* 6 (4), pp. 391-408.

Richardson, B.C. (1983), *Caribbean migrants: migration and human survival in St.Kitts-Nevis*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

Rhoades, R.E. (1978) ‘Foreign labour and German industrial capitalism 1871-1978: the evolution of a migratory system’, *American Ethnologist*, 5 (3) pp. 553-573.

Watson, H. A. (1982) ‘Theoretical and methodological problems in Commonwealth Caribbean migration research: conditions and causality’, *Social and Economic Studies*, 31 (1) pp.165-206.

Wolf, E. (1982) *Europe and the people without history*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Wood, C.H. (1982) ‘Equilibrium and historical structural perspectives on migration’, *International Migration Review*, 16 (2) pp.298-319.

1. Including Barbados and all Anglophone Leeward and Windward islands except Anguilla. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Figures on rate of return are averages until the mid-1980s. 1970-79 and then 3 year averages until 1987 from when annual figures are available [↑](#endnote-ref-2)