

Migration and refugees in British history

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The current lively nature of the field of migration history belies its slow start as an area of concern for historians of modern Britain. Aside from isolated studies of particular migrant groups to Britain – such as Jerzy Zubrzycki's 1956 study of the Polish population – the history of international migrants to Britain in the decades after the war was left largely to social scientists and those considering the 'problem' of 'race'. This was the time of Sheila Patterson's (1963) *Dark Strangers*, and the preoccupation with how long it took migrants to 'adjust' or assimilate to British society.¹ And here 'Britain' was conceived of as a static monolithic entity, a liberal democratic state and its people imbued with the virtues of tolerance and good sense.

It took until the 1980s for historians such as Kenneth Lunn and Colin Holmes to challenge this picture. The title of one of Lunn's early books – *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities* (1980) – gives a flavour of how rather than assimilating into a tolerant and open British society, well after the point of arrival, Lunn argued that international migrants and other minority populations continued to be seen, and to see themselves, as separate from the majority British population.

In part such scholarship became a response to the implicit challenge posed by the Brixton uprising and other riots of the early 1980s, that Britain had a long and endemic history of racism towards outsiders. Jennifer Davis, writing in the aftermath of the 1985 riots in Tottenham and elsewhere, did this explicitly in an article exploring how 'long-term anxieties about the state of the nation' could be mapped onto the policing of two different first and second generation migrant communities: late nineteenth century Irish migrants and those in the mid-twentieth century from the Caribbean.² Her examination of the policing of migrants and settled minority communities, and what we now term institutionalised racism across time, pointed to the problems caused by the 'saturation policing' of migrant communities. We can set her work within one central thread of this new strand of historical writing, which was concerned with charting longer histories of racism – and antisemitism – as well as the activism of migrants themselves. The aim here was both to set out the short-comings of the majority society and to foreground the agency of the migrants themselves.

Simultaneously, the last decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of celebratory community histories that emerged from the broader project of multiculturalism and which aimed to write histories of Britain's recent international migrants into what was now being accepted as a pluralist Britain. Black

History Month, first an initiative of Lambeth Council before becoming a national event, was one attempt to write the experiences of its diverse black populations into histories of Britain. Whether national-level or small-scale community, these initiatives have created important new sources and archives for historians, while adding to, and sometimes rewriting, British history. Yet, some historians have sounded a note of caution. Concerned as many have been with constructing positive depictions of international migrants, a focus on 'success' stories and their contribution to British society has served to marginalise or silence dissenting voices, and gloss over how their experiences have been produced within a society marked by inequality and racism.

By the 2000s we began to see the broadening and growing sophistication of the field, as historians started to explore the differences *within* minority and migrant groups – of class, caste, origin, gender, religion – as well as what are often seen by outsiders as the more obvious divisions between migrants and majority society. If the idea of difference has become the heart of much historical interest, so too the theme of continuity has started to emerge. Looking at the links and threads which tied migrants across places and to the past has allowed historians to move beyond an analysis of the process of 'assimilation' into the host society. Tied to this, neither decision making nor the actual process of migration are now seen by historians as occurring in isolation, but rather as being the complex product of economic and social opportunities, constraints, networks and intimate and personal decisions. Consequently the idea of transnationalism – which has also shaped other historiographies in the last decade or more – has become increasingly important to historians of migration, as they have begun to consider how migrants' lives stretched over space, reconfigured the ongoing importance of family and community networks and the role of remittances in sustaining family in their place of origin. Histories of emotion, too, have permeated migration scholarship. Acts like falling in love or feeling homesick now feature within histories of migration, alongside more traditional discussions of economic choices and immigration regulations.

One feature of the development of histories of migration has been the emergence of a broad consensus that scholars need to be willing to embrace different, and sometimes innovative, methodologies to get at the experiences of migrants, particularly those nearly invisible in the archive. Alongside oral histories, historians have increasingly also turned to analysing material objects, language, food and religion, as well as visual cultures, in their search to construct histories of migrants.³



Within the far smaller sub-field of British refugee history we have seen a similar arc of historical interest: a smattering of small studies within a general picture of neglect; followed by the emergence of celebratory accounts – typically featuring Jewish refugees from Nazism or the success of Ugandan Asian expellees after their arrival in Britain in 1972 – writing them into the story of a successful and vibrant multi-cultural Britain at the end of the twentieth century. Even more so than with migrants more generally, here the tendency has been to emphasise the contributions refugees have made to Britain after arrival. This tendency has the twin effect of affirming the tolerance and openness of British society and deflecting any criticism – actual or potential – that refugees are a drain on the nation's resources.

It was Tony Kushner, writing first of the experience of Jewish refugees coming to Britain, and then of refugee groups more generally, who has been central to producing more nuanced and critical work, challenging the myth of British tolerance and welcome, and revealing the struggles faced by refugees across time as they seek to build new lives for themselves in a new, and often strange, society. Working more from an international perspective, Peter Gatrell's work has helpfully shown how reactions in Britain to refugees need to be placed within the context of over a century's worth of grappling with 'the refugee problem' in international arenas and at the global scale. Building on such work, a number of scholars – myself, also Jordanna Bailkin – have begun to look at the reception, treatment and experience of refugees and asylum seekers within the broader context of the profound changes in Britain over the last century.

Them and Us?

We are used to thinking that migration means international migration, specifically the crossing of international borders. Yet this is a relatively recent phenomenon, both in terms of popular understanding, and in relation to how historians have approached the movement of people. Early modernists



Supporters call for an amnesty for the 'Windrush generation' who were invited to the UK as British citizens. London, 30 April 2018
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and historians of the nineteenth century have no difficulty in talking about rural to urban migration, understanding that the large numbers of migrants from the countryside to rapidly growing cities profoundly re-shaped Britain's landscape and society. But when thinking about mid-twentieth century Britain such internal migration has tended to be forgotten – rather, the headline image is that of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948. This arrival of 492 passengers and at least one stowaway from Jamaica is often used as a shorthand to describe the beginning of a new era of migration from New Commonwealth countries – primarily the Caribbean and South Asia – to Britain. This then is taken more broadly as proxy for the rise, and then later the failure, of multicultural Britain. And underpinning scholarship on migration has long been the assumption that 'native' Britons, and particularly working class ones – are distinct from 'migrants'. Layered onto this in political discourse is how 'the British', particularly working classes, are



A party of Kenyan Asians arrive in Britain in February 1968 to beat the restrictions on immigration that were to be rushed through Parliament in March

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portrayed as fixed in place – often on council estates – and seen as being the 'natives', the people whose territory is invaded by 'migrants'.

But what happens if we try and look at things differently, if we begin to think more historically about the term 'migrant', or 'foreigner' or 'stranger'? What happens if we ask 'what did it mean to belong' or be seen as an outsider, in the past? In fact,

one of the key developments in scholarship in recent years has been the explicit questioning of the opposition between 'migrants' and 'the British'. While the twin shocks of the 2015 refugee movements to Europe and the 2016 Brexit vote gave this added political urgency, in fact, for a range of reasons, historians have been destabilising the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' for some years.

Work by the historian Keith Snell has shown the ongoing importance of this fierce attachment to place and accompanying suspicion of all outsiders – what he called 'local xenophobia' – right up to the Second World War. His work asks us to think about the boundaries which were important to people in their localities. An affiliation to parish, township, hamlet or estate was characteristic of many rural areas, with such extremely local units of belonging often eclipsing any larger rallying point for loyalty, so that those from outside parish boundaries might be viewed with deep suspicion.

George Ewart Evans, who did so much to record the voices and world views of the rural people of East Anglia in the first half of the twentieth century, had a number of stories to illustrate what he called 'this intense parochialism'. He wrote, for example, about the grandfather of an elderly man who left his parish only once, to visit a place five or six miles away, and who upon returning remarked 'Thank God I'm back in good owd England!' He never left again. In his autobiography Evans described how the first physical education class he ran for young men in rural Cambridgeshire broke up, because he had put together people from three proximate villages. They said: 'We are not going to spend the rest of the evening with foreigners.'⁴

Why is this important? Once we start thinking about boundaries, about migration and about strangerdom as involving something other than international boundaries, and foreignness being only linked to international strangers, our

account of migration and change begins to look rather different. No longer are we trying to construct an understanding of how our country is different to the past based on 'Muslims' or 'Poles' coming in and changing 'our way of life'. Instead, by using the basic definition of migration used by migration sociologists – 'a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence' – which avoids distinctions based on distance, magnitude or motive, we can think differently about migration and change.⁵

As David Renton has pointed out, internal migration has been central to how British regions changed over the twentieth century, as both a reflection of, and a driver for, socio-economic change.⁶ Between 1927 and 1938, more than 100,000 people left the north-east of England as part of a national scheme to relocate people living in poor mining areas. Again, in the 1950s, the population of the region fell by around 70,000, chiefly as a result of people looking for work elsewhere in Britain. Such bald statistics point to the entanglement of intimate and official decision making as a driver for migration. While such moves were often the result of individual, or familial choices, it is also the case that for many Britons the history of internal migration is tied intimately to the history of council housing. Indeed, David Feldman, one of Britain's leading historians on migration, has described the relocation of millions of Britain's working class people from inner city slums to suburban and new council estates as one of the largest mass movements of population in Britain's history.

Norwich was one of the exemplars here. Norwich city council was one of the most active providers of council housing in the country, so that by the 1970s there were more council houses per capita in the city than anywhere else in England. In doing so it changed the face of the city and the surrounding villages. The construction, between 1928 and 1937 of its North Earlham and Larkman estates, saw ten thousand households moving from the city's crowded courts and yards to the suburban fringes, where childhood memories focus on playing in the woods, fields and rivers beyond the city limits. For adults, the transition could be difficult – one new council house resident described a feeling of exile, which compounded by the cold east wind blowing through the new estates, caused him to remember it being like 'Siberia'.

Indeed, when historians write about the history of suburban council estates, absolutely central to the experiences of many of those who were moved, it seems, were feelings of profound dislocation, alienation and 'foreignness'. For example in May 1928, the first edition of *The Watling Resident*, a local newspaper directed at a readership of one of London's first suburban council estates declared how, 'It took the opportunity to represent what it saw as its readers' urgent and existential difficulties: 'We have been torn up by the roots and rudely transplanted to foreign soil.' According to the newspaper, these sentiments were voiced 'over and over again' by people living on the estate. As Feldman has pointed out:

it is remarkable that these migrants were not recent arrivals from Poland, or even from Ireland or Scotland; rather they had moved to the estate from inner London, and more than a half had previously lived a few miles away in the north London boroughs of St Pancras, Islington, Finsbury and Paddington.⁷

Setting internal migration alongside moves across international borders, and using oral histories alongside more traditional archival research, has done much to challenge how we think about how Britain has been reshaped by migration over the last century. Current scholarship is concerned with exploring not only mobility as a fact of human history, but also as a story as much about emotion and experiences of belonging or strangeness as of economics and political control.

Resources

The intensity of political and public interest in migration as a topic, and the fertility of migration history as a field has meant that there is a growing pool of digital resources to support teaching in this subject.

Beyond the Our Migration Story website (<https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/>), which was specifically designed as a companion tool to the GCSE Migration module syllabus, a number of new online resources are available, many of which are summarised in the Migration Museum's directory of resources (www.migrationmuseum.org/resource-bank/).

The National Archives' Bound for Britain project (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/bound-for-britain/) and the rich range of resources held by the British Library (e.g. www.bl.uk/collection-guides?subject=Black%20Britain%20and%20Asian%20Britain) give a sense of the range of material held in archives and provide useful accessible teaching resources.

The Institute of Historical Research's Migration: Crossing Borders webpage (www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Migration/articles/index.html) offers thirteen open access short essays on different aspects of the history of migration from a range of specialists in the field, and usefully considers both international and internal migration.

Academic projects which have made their findings freely available in an accessible form for teachers include Places for All (<http://placesforall.co.uk/>), a Peterborough-based research project which used oral histories and photography to look at the migration histories of its residents – those who had come from abroad and those who were born in Britain.

History Workshop Journal's special virtual issue on Migration and Mobility, (September 2018, <https://academic.oup.com/hwj/pages/migrationandmobilityvi>), has an introductory essay by Julia Laite which usefully sets out how historians have approached the history of migration since the 1970s, providing an intellectual map to chart the expanding interest academics have had in this field.

Refugee History (<http://refugeehistory.org/>), an initiative of the UEA, has developed a number of freely available online and downloadable resources. These include short blog pieces introducing different aspects of the most recent historical research on refugees, and timelines of immigration law and refugee movements, and a history of refugee detention.

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