

Empire beyond the Imperial Domain: British Colonial Encounters in Cuba

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The year 2008 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the arrival of the *S.S. Empire Windrush* to Tilbury. The event symbolises for some the beginning of 'multicultural' Britain, and for others the beginning of Britain's encounter with its colonial 'others' at home. These 'others' were not only colonial, but racial others; black British subjects were now at the centre of the Empire. In 1948, Prime Minister Clement Attlee, facing some concerns about the *Windrush's* Jamaican passengers, noted that it was 'traditional that British subjects' of 'whatever race or colour' be admitted freely into the United Kingdom. It would be a 'mistake to take any measure which would tend to weaken the goodwill and loyalty of the Colonies towards Britain', and more so at a moment when the country was 'importing foreign labour in large numbers'.¹

The underlying dilemmas of race, labour and Empire illustrated in Attlee's letter were not new. The arrival of Caribbean migrants in Britain was both a continuation of Britain's encounters with its colonial others, and another stage in the history of Caribbean people serving as foreign migrant labour. Moreover, at the time of Attlee's letter, in other locations beyond the imperial domain, the 'loyalty' of British Caribbean migrant workers was seen as 'merely sentimental' and British authorities aimed at 'loosening' the ties with the Empire.² A look at those other locations might help us see 1948 in a different light, confronting what Stuart Hall once called Britain's 'loss of historical memory' about race and Empire.³

During the five decades before 1948, thousands of people from the British Caribbean migrated from their colonial homelands to places throughout the Americas as workers. Railways in Central America and even as far as Brazil and Ecuador, plantations in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the Hispanic Caribbean, oil in the southern Caribbean, and farms in the northern United States were some of the economic ventures that attracted these labourers. Cuba alone received more than 250,000 British Caribbean migrants to work mostly in its booming sugar industry. Unable to make a living in the British Caribbean colonies due to the economic control of the planter classes, and oppressed by the colonial regime, the landless and marginalized British Afro-Antilleans would end up leaving their islands to become the labour force behind the production of Cuban sugar. After the United States, Britain was Cuba's most important outlet for sugar, an item produced in the Cuban sugar cane plantations mostly by foreign migrant labourers, including colonial British subjects.

As I set out to research the history of British Caribbean migrants in Cuba, I found that it was in this experience that many migrants

faced the racial politics and ideology of Empire, before they ever arrived in the United Kingdom. It is no secret to Caribbean scholars that unearthing their past requires a journey to the lands and archives of the former colonisers, in this case the British National Archives in Kew. The Foreign Office papers are the repository of reports on the many British Caribbean migrants across the Americas, but also of some surviving letters written by the migrants themselves.

In places like Cuba, black Caribbean migrant labourers were subject to social and racial discrimination. Cuban elites during the era of the Republic constructed their nation as 'white' and governments in Cuba had historically feared any social, cultural, or political influence from neighbouring islands with larger Afro-Caribbean populations. Black British Antilleans thus became the victims of Cuban racism. Their response as British subjects was to appeal to the British consuls for support. As migrants wrote numerous letters to their representatives, the principal job of British consuls and ministers in Cuba became that of dealing with imperial subjects in a foreign territory, rather than other (more 'important') duties related to trade and



Kitchen at Cuban American Sugar Company's Quarantine Station, Puerto Padre, Cuba, 1920s. Photo from Agricultura y zootecnia.

commerce. This encounter of the black migrants with the white representatives of the British Empire was in itself a colonial encounter with the ‘other’ – taking place, not in the centre of Empire (as in 1948) or its periphery (i.e. the colonies), but outside the imperial domain altogether. Black Jamaicans, Barbadians, Dominicans, and many other islanders wrote consistently to the consuls demanding support as British subjects. White British consuls were suddenly faced with a taste of equality that ignored their preconceptions as representatives of imperial

power. In claiming their subjecthood, black Caribbean migrants forced British officialdom to draw a line of distinction, which consuls and ministers did by using power hierarchies and race.

St Lucians, Grenadians, and other islanders became racially qualified subjects. They were *black* British subjects, while the consuls and other British people in Cuba were forced to make explicit their race and ethnic characteristics as *white* British subjects. As historian Catherine Hall has put it, for a different context, after the colonial

encounter, it was ‘no longer possible to believe only in “negative ethnicity” where only “the other” is visibly ethnic’ and being British was no longer ‘outside of ethnicity’.⁴ Whiteness was unveiled as a racial category.

Most diplomatic representatives blatantly ignored the claims of black British Antilleans, treated them condescendingly or did not give credibility to their complaints. Some consuls provided assistance and defended migrants abused by the Cuban authorities; but other diplomatic representatives had a conflict of interests, being both British consuls and upper-level employees in the sugar industry that employed the unfree labour that they were supposed to defend. Other ‘white members of the British Legation’ described ‘British West Indians not as British subjects but as “British objects”’, clearly marking distinctions that would later exist at the centre of the Empire.⁵ The history of these encounters clearly reminds us that ‘race is a relationship, not a thing,’ as written by Laura Tabili echoing E. P. Thompson.⁶ Racial marking (and self-awareness) took place as a process in the relation between colonial subjects and imperial representatives.

The meticulous archive researcher will find, behind the official type-written reports of Foreign Office personnel, the surviving letters of the migrants. Often in handwritten form and at times illegible print on a poorer quality paper, these letters are attached – if one is lucky – behind official type-written correspondence more friendly to the historian’s eyes. Both sources are useful in providing different ‘voices’ (some more privileged than others) and angles to a story that needs to be written.

The strategy of black British subjects is evident in their decisions about whom to write to. After being ignored by consuls operating in Santiago de Cuba or Havana, they elevated their protest to higher colonial and imperial authorities, or sometimes, knowing that they would be ignored, they wrote to their islands of origin. Many even wrote directly to London, thinking – perhaps naively in their idealisation of imperial altruism, or strategically – that their plight would be listened to by officers in the Foreign and Colonial Offices, and even by Scotland Yard and the King.

Letter from M. A. Jacobs to Honorable Representatives, [Foreign Office], 5 May 1931
(National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Papers, 369/2191)

May it please you honorable gentlemen that we the British Leeward and Windward West Indians Subjects, residing in the above mentioned part of Cuba, have forwarded a petition with a number of five hundred fifteen signatories to the British Consul at Havana asking him for His Majesty's protection towards our deadly situation in this island of Cuba, and has failed in so doing. As a matter of fact, the General Manager of the Chaparra Sugar Company, by whom we were brought here as immigrants, influenced the consul with all false reports, went all over in the [bush] and to different sections of the estate where he has all the British Subjects bound in misery, calamities and with starvation, compelled them to sign a typewritten document that is against the petition, state that ‘the men are well treated by the Company, and are having everything to their facilities, and that they do not want to go home.’ With all these false, he compelled the Consul to dropped the matter right there. Honorable gentlemen, it is not only five hundred and fifteen British subjects that are in this place, there are thousands of us here, and the Company do not want to take us back to our homes where he had taken us because he has us using as tools. It is quite sad and pietyful to see and know that all Subjects of every nations, whether large or small, are being protected in this island, except we the British subjects. Because we will not make any complains, they treated us like dogs. The Americans, the Spaniards, the Frenchmen, the Dutchmen means are being provided for every one of them to get out, except we the British subjects. Honorable gentelment, we humbly beg to take this in consideration, as our cases are quite serious. The present condition of Cuba is known all over the world. It was a glory to the Company when they were bringing us here by the boat loads, and now they are resisting in taking us back. We didn't come her for life time, we came here to fight for a living and right now we [no]tice that there is no progress; to the contrary, starvation has taken place; and a famine is threatening the island right now. So before many of us should die through starvation and calamities we are putting our distress to the mother country, asking her for some kind of assistance by which we may be able to l[e]ave this island of Cuba. We are just like the children of Israel in the land of Egypt. Consequently we hereby appeal to your kind assistance over the matter, hoping that your friendly conscience will appl[ause] your [...] feelings, toward this important and loyal cause.

We are patiently awaiting your favorable reply ‘Salvamos Deus.’

We beg to remain, Subordinately Yours, British West Indian Subjects. M.A. Jacobs.

Letter from James Sylvester to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, UK, 17 December 1944
(National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office Papers 371/44438)

San Benito
De Songo
Oriente De Cuba
Dec: 17th 1944

To

Minister of Foreign affairs.

Dear Sir I the undersign now solicit [the] opportunity to writing you these few lines trusting that they may meet yours generous consideration.

Sir the [reason] of this my letter is that I beg to inform you that I the said undersign James Sylvestir a British born Subject of Trinidad [B.W.I][presently] residing in Cuba now for many years through The Conditions That we as foreigners must be thrown out of work and make Space for the natives.

Therefore under these Conditions we have got to be here and there seeking something for us to do so as to secure life. And under these circumstances we are expose to all taunts and insults from the Cubans. Sir there is something ocured in 1941 between my Self and a Cuban Coffee Propriter by the name of Francisco Maturell on the 26 of August in the Said Year that I was badly beaten by Both him and his son wounding me materially[?] and broked one of my hand[s] then I had to appeal then to the counsel who took little [or no] interest in the Cause of a British West Indian in this Country.

I have actually thrown in the streets of the Town Hospital of Santiago where I was Then before I see me was Said to be The Vice Counsel [w]ho got all the information from [...] what ocured. Then after the counsel General in Havana wrote me and also got full information of Same.

Then after they had received all those information. The case was tried in The High Courts in Santiago to which Judgment was given on my behalf. [Maturell] was sentence to 4 months in prison and the sum of two Hundred Diollars to be paid to me as indemnity.

That case was tried on the 19th of February 1942 and from thence I have got nothing [scratch] not hear anything about the two Hundred Dollars Indemnity. I waited and receive nothing I wrote all the Governmental department I got no reply then I appeal again to the counsels and got no reply neither.

Therefore there is no other source as for me to appeal [illegible] to His Magestis Government as to whom I believe will Interce[de] to the cause of one of her unfortunate subject in This Country without protection.

leaving These to your Hospitable Consideration I have the Honour to be

Sir Your
Obedient Servant
James Sylvester
San Benito
De Songo
Oriente de Cuba

Facsimile sections of the letter sent by James Sylvester

This is a history of people who did not revolt in arms against the Empire, but who challenged its assumptions with paper and ink, using the language of power and empire to their own advantage. They wrote skilfully using the rhetoric of imperial allegiance and membership. In 1921, a migrant named George Smith along with others was faced

with the lack of action of the local consul in Cuba and decided to make his demands at a higher level. He wrote to the Home Office, saying of the consul: 'He disacknowledge us as British subjects.' Smith added that the majority of the group were veteran soldiers of the British West Indies Regiment, thereby giving their case greater authority.⁷

Indeed, for those who had served during the First World War, their participation became a source of empowerment. A group of migrants wrote to the War Office in 1928: 'As a British subject I believe to myself that this is very unfair to treat a British subject in that kind of way.' 'So we would be very grateful,' they added, 'if our Mother Country could take

some more interest in us in this country [Cuba] as Britishers.' They questioned whether the consul in Cuba had reported anything on their situation, adding that as 'fair thinking Loyal subjects of His Majesty the King' they demanded 'proper investigation' of the abuses against fellow migrants, concluding that they 'should not be allowed to be abuse or kill by inferior nation of any kind that would only show the world that we as British Subjects are not protected abroad.'⁸ These appeals to higher authorities from the Cuban context to the centre of Empire jumped the chain of command, and in many cases served as a tool by which the migrants indirectly forced the consuls in Cuba (via their superiors in London) to provide the support they wanted.

During their years working in Cuba, searching for a better life, and facing Cuban xenophobia and racism, British Caribbean islanders also faced discrimination and neglect by the British authorities. They struggled in multiple ways (including the written word), challenging the Empire's racial understandings and power structure, and organising themselves as part of a Caribbean community in rural Cuba. By the 1940s, most of the migrants had taken a decision to return to their islands of origin, stay in Cuba (where some of them had effectively made a life), or search for better opportunities elsewhere. With the crisis in the colonies after the Second World War, some stayed voluntarily in Cuba, where they remain today as a community that even plays cricket. Others stayed against their wishes, partly because the British did not wish to organise a

repatriation scheme that would bring unemployed British subjects to colonies experiencing socioeconomic crisis. Others decided to venture elsewhere, including London, where they would, yet again, face racial discrimination, and yet again, overcome their circumstances in order to succeed in a foreign land.

Since his *Europe and the People without History* more than two decades ago, the late Eric Wolf always encouraged us to look for connections: those links between people, ideas and processes that are not always acknowledged by scholars.⁹ The Caribbean identities at play in Britain today have early roots (and indeed parallels) in the British identities contested in the Caribbean and Cuban plantations decades ago by black British Caribbean migrants. I uncovered that Cuban and Caribbean connection in the London archives, emerging with some answers and yet more questions. To answer these new questions, to conclude that history, understand it and make sense of its meaning, I returned to the Caribbean, to the localities where the stories took place, to the places where the migrants lived (and their descendants still live), to the context where a struggle with the past is always in motion.

Notes

- 1 C. R. Attlee to J. D. Murray, 5 July 1948, National Archives, Kew (hereafter, NA), HO 213/715).
- 2 M. E. Vibert, 'Minutes: British West Indian Relief in Cuba, S. Domingo and Haiti' (1948), NA, FO 369/3962, no. K656; 'Note of a Meeting held at Palace Chambers at 11 a.m. on Saturday the 15th July, 1944', enclosed in Whitehorn to H.A.H. Hohler, FO, 17 July 1944, NA, FO 371/38075.

3 Stuart Hall, 'Racism and Reaction', in *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain* (London, Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), p. 25.

4 Catherine Hall, "'From Greenland's Icy Mountains... to Africa's Golden Sands': Ethnicity, Race and Nation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England', *Gender and History*, 5:2 (Summer 1993), 215.

5 G. Ogilvie-Forbes to Anthony Eden, 16 February 1942, NA, FO 371/30461.

6 Laura Tabili, 'Race is a relationship, not a thing', *Journal of Social History*, 37:1 (2003), 125–130.

7 George Smith to Home Office, 7 December 1921, NA, FO 371/5565.

8 Charles Burt *et al.* to British War Office, London, 24 November 1928, FO 369/2022.

9 Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Eric R. Wolf, *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*, with Sydel Silverman; foreword by Aram A. Yengoyan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 308.

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