Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization

Review Number:
1159
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 November, 2011
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ISBN:
9780199588558
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£55.00
Pages:
288pp.
Publisher:
Oxford University Press
Place of Publication:
Oxford
Reviewer:
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Why are so many West Indians who were born in the first half of the 20th century so enamoured with Britain, British culture and its monarchy, even in the early 21st century? To someone born of part-Caribbean heritage in Britain after 1950, the nostalgia expressed for life under British rule not only seems to go against the contemporary post-colonial grain, but also to be an uncomfortable matter of unrequited love. This feeling is never stronger than when reading the accounts of migrants to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and their shock and disappointment at their less-than-warm welcome to the ?Mother country?. There is a strange naiveté (always easy to judge in hindsight) and charm to that long-gone world of decency and those high expectations of the British and their relations with their colonial subjects. As we all know everything was not as simple as painted. I was reminded of this recently when viewing E. R. Braithwaite?s screen adaptation of his book *To Sir With Love*. Sidney Poitier is dignified in the role of the young Guyanese teacher in the working class East End, dealing with white children infected with the racism of their times, yet recognising that this ?coloured man? (one of the least offensive terms one can use from the film) was not quite what they had expected, at least class-wise. As one of the schoolchildren in the movie exclaims, ?How come Sir you are a Toff? You speak like one, yet you seem similar to us!? Maybe that was meant as a compliment for the black teacher.

This sense of vague affinity juxtaposed against an ideological post-colonial psychosis has been written about by cultural theorists like Stuart Hall and others. More recently Anne Spry Rush in *Bonds of Empire-West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization*, writing from a historical perspective, has updated this multifarious and almost schizophrenic relationship between West Indians and the British state. Reading this book allows one to make sense of many incongruities that one often observes among older ?West Indians?; their love-hate relationship with the British, and their struggle to resettle in the contemporary Caribbean and adjust to West Indian culture while seeming more British than the British. Having built their affluent houses ?back home? many now feel as if they are in a foreign land, so different are the islands from the ones they left under British rule.

In contemporary times, the emphasis given to former colonial ?bonds?, as Rush calls them, is not always one way. Though the terminology has changed the relationship is acknowledged at least ceremonially. The gravity of the annual Remembrance Day ceremony at the Cenotaph in London and inclusion (at last) of West Indian servicemen and official representatives means, despite the occasional snide commentary in the press, that the Commonwealth is just about acknowledged. On the part of the Commonwealth one cannot but be bemused at the continued affection and enthusiasm these countries hold for the British monarchy. We saw this following the recent royal wedding in April of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, during their trip to Canada, which had a level of mass hysteria emanating from crowds welcoming them that must have disillusioned republicans on all sides. There is the historic constitutional change to the line of succession to the British throne. This is a departure from centuries old male primogeniture, so that female members of the royal family will be given equality with men in the rules of succession to the throne even if subsequent males are born. This was announced by the British Prime Minister at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, attended by the Queen, in Perth, Australia (October 2011), and was agreed unanimously by the Commonwealth nations, sixteen ?realms? of which the Queen continues to be the monarch. It may only have been rubber stamping of a change which the British government had long ago thrashed out the merits of, but the fact that the compliance of the Commonwealth was sought, and the significance of where and among whom the announcement was made, speaks volumes about the bonds that still exist. It has to be said that Queen Elizabeth II takes her responsibility to the Commonwealth extremely seriously despite the dismissive tones of political commentators.

In her narrative Rush does an admirable job of unpacking the elements that formed and strengthened the bonds between Britain and its colonies in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, though the physical markers rapidly decayed after the British left, the ideological legacies still remain. The author deconstructs the way in which class, education, the church, the symbolism, ritual and role of British Royalty, the world wars, the BBC and its colonial service all contributed to the ambivalences of and shaped individual Caribbean lives. Indeed, it can be argued that they set the tone for generations to come. We get a multi-layered analysis that provides a comprehensive account of those times. This is not however a simple narrative of top-down cultural imperialism. Instead a more complex tapestry is drawn of West Indians, within their island context, actively participating in a process of cultural transition. They manipulate the totem of ?Britishness?, reshaping the conceits of cultural imperialism. Many are not mere receptors but in various arenas utilise an agency which makes no apologies for who or what they are and where they seek to go. Rush argues as to the convincing nature of the cultural propaganda of Britishness, which was touted as the exemplar of civilisation. Education in particular was a significant conduit for this propaganda, and through schools and schooling it pervaded the whole society of the Caribbean, with a degree of complicity in some cases. Caribbean peoples were encouraged to identify with the social structures, the cultural values and a history at times utterly out of step with their own histories and current realities. However, there was an interesting twist in the way that many middle-class West Indians of colour duly appropriated Britishness as part of their own identity and transformed it to suit them. This was often unsettling for the native Britons they encountered during the war and after. Britain itself had become enthralled by its own mythologies of a imperial identity, an identity which stood separate from, and yet was intimately related to, the national mindset and motifs of an empire miles away in sunnier climes. The shock was when the empire arrived in their neighbourhoods and they were confronted with their inaccurate and prejudiced myths which had to be adjusted.

Rush shows us what imperial identity and culture came to mean for West Indians as they re-fashioned it in their daily lives and seized the opportunities open to them. The Caribbean was going through a social, political and cultural transformation, and the inhabitants were determined to be the masters of their own fates while demanding inclusivity in the reconfiguration of a post-colonial Britain, a post-colonial Britain which in fact was in dire need of them in its labour force. In addition, we learn more about the colonial mindset, the official, both white and black, running the colonies as well as about relations with Britain?s emerging competitors in the region for influence ? the Americans. Once again what has become a truism is borne out under the microscope of this narrative, things really are never as they seem, and the agency of non-hegemonic peoples should never be underestimated. Rush?s primary sources are as illuminating as the body of the text.

The author thanks the reviewer for her thoughtful comments.

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