

Narratives of Exile and Return

Review Number:

46

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 January, 1998

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ISBN:

9780312164843

Date of Publication:

1997

Price:

£35.00

Pages:

236pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave

Publisher url:

<http://www.palgrave.com/home/>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Paul Thompson

You might not easily grasp why Mary Chamberlain's *Narratives of Exile and Return* is an important innovative contribution to historical scholarship if you took your cue from the ambivalent way in which the text is wrapped: on the one hand looking very much like a straight addition to the admirable Warwick Caribbean academic book series, but on the other hand introduced by the genial series editor Alistair Hennessy as a potential popular successor to classic life story books like Oscar Lewis's *Pedro Martinez* or *Children of Sanchez*. I would be rather surprised if the book takes off in that style. It would, I suspect, need a much more complex message for a success of that type. Its strength is much more in its subtle originality.

This is not to suggest that I disagree with Hennessy's comment that Chamberlain has produced 'a finely-written and well-crafted book'. She is indeed at all times lucid and elegant, and it is also true that her 'mastery of theory' is 'lightly worn'. Her style is certainly a breath of fresh air, perhaps especially now in the humid Caribbean environment. She has always written with this special flair, right from her early masterpiece, *Fenwomen*, which was the first major work of women's history to use oral history interview sources. That book did indeed hit the headlines, even to the extent of gaining some uncomfortable notoriety as a sex exposé in the *News of the World*. But *Fenwomen* was a very different kind of book, combining an appeal for the hearing of women's voices from the past with the English fascination with village communities, and its intellectual argument is largely concealed, deftly filtered through the skilful editing of the testimonies. With *Narratives* the balance has shifted radically: the academic historian now clearly dominates, and the edited testimonies from five Barbadian families are relegated to the second half of the book.

The book essentially revolves around two twin themes, migration from Barbados and transatlantic family transmission, and I want to return to them. But the testimonies are certainly a very important part of the book. Many of the speakers emerge quite strongly as characters, and the combination of great varieties in spoken English, ranging from deep rural Barbadian dialect to the globalised accents of modern metropolitan youth, together with the rich cultural detail from yams and guasvas to rap music, hi-fi, and Cindy dolls. Most important of all, they take us into aspects of experience which it would be otherwise unimaginable. Thus when eighty-year-old Lorissa Clarke, the eldest of eight country children, speaks of her childhood poverty, it is the strange detail which brings her message home:

You had to pay a penny to go to school, every Monday morning, otherwise the schoolmaster ent going to let you in. When you can't got the penny to send, we had to stand at home.

We had enough thing to do to help our mother. We had to bring water from miles. We time, you used to head water. You had to pick up wood. We used to had a rock fire outside in the yard, next to the kitchen door and you put on that the iron pot, to cook in. No saucepan nor nothing so ent stirring yet. It used to be sweet enough, with wood, not with no gas nor nothing. Not even to iron your clothes, we use to had to iron we clothes with mahogany seeds, in a coal pot. A lot of work...

We had to sleep just where they put we. Upon the floor. We get flour bags and make bed, and stuff them with khus khus grass, or sour grass.

Lorissa is equally vivid about the brutality of childhood work, when she started gang labour in the fields aged twelve: 'There was a driver [forewoman]. She used to tell you what to do, show you how to do it and then she watch you do it. She used to carry a whip, and if you do anything, she give you a lash or two.' Lorissa says that she was never whipped herself. But others tell symbolically powerful stories of racist oppression at work, and some also of how they confronted it - stories which are unlikely to be literally true of what was said at the time, but which tell us very clearly what the victim of the abuse *felt*. Thus for Jasper, who was born in Barbados but joined his parents in Britain at the age of fifteen in 1961, the day when he first stood up for himself was a crucial moment in his life. He was by then a London bus conductor, aged nineteen but already married:

I remember quite clearly the day I became a man. I was working on the buses and went to work one morning at four o'clock. There was an English fellow booking you in and I said, 'Good morning, Mr Snow.' His name was Johnnie Snow. 'Morning, Mr Snow.' He says, 'Well, Sambo.' I said, 'Mr Snow, I said "Good morning" to you. I said "Good morning, Mr Snow". I didn't say, "Good morning, honky, whitey, John Bull" or anything else. I just said, "Good morning, Mr Snow." If you can't call me by my proper name, just don't call me anything.

That morning, I became a man. I wouldn't tolerate anything like that. There were other times, after, when I had to exert myself...

The testimonies are especially fascinating for what they reveal - both overtly and unconsciously - of Barbadian attitudes to the family. On the one hand the very matter-of-fact vocabulary in itself emphasises the social acceptance of traditional features of West Indian family life, such as the impermanence of conjugal partnerships, the sharing of parental responsibilities among kin - so that Beula describes herself as a 'grandmother child' - and the common tolerance by wives of their husbands' 'outside women'. On the other, it is particularly interesting when this is also expressed conceptually in the life stories. Jasper, for example, explains how his fisherman great-grandfather, who died when he was five, 'had about three women, and all three had a number of children from him... And he was the common denominator, he was the person who kept us together as a family, so the outside and the inside family, were all family.'

Equally important, the testimonies also underline how the social acceptance of such a dispersed family system, which was still further emphasised through the practice of migration, in no way eliminated the pain caused by family separations. The argument that just because a practice is common, it is emotionally acceptable too, has too often been used by historians of the family: most notoriously in the suggestion that in the past, because infant mortality was common, parents suffered much less from the death of a child. The same comments have often been made of mothers who sent their infants to be wet-nursed. It is therefore crucial for us to bear in mind the witness which these life stories bring of the sufferings which migration must have imposed on so many spouses, parents and children.

Louise, for example, born in the 1920s, first worked as a weeder in the fields, and had a daughter and a son before marriage, the first by a white manager who sent her regular money but then ceased when he married another woman. She was nearly forty when both children migrated to England. She recalls: 'They wanted to go. I said, well, if they go and they make it, it will be alright, but if they don't make it, they must work as much as would pay the fare to come back. It wasn't a lot of nothing to pack, only the clothes.' Long afterwards, 'I used to cry every day, when I used to put the food, I used to cry, say I want them, I wonder if, how they is getting through and so on'. And her sorrows were hardly lessened by the unsympathetic attitudes of her husband, who was the children's stepfather rather than their father. 'My husband he used to tell me, "I can't understand, you send them over to England and now is crying, constant crying, crying, crying".'

Full of rich evidence as these testimonies are, however, my sense is that it will take a sharp reader to draw out their full potential. There are a number of difficulties to overcome. Firstly, they are certain to be much more resonant for the few who know the Barbadian context than for the many who do not. This problem is made more serious in some cases by the need to understand meanings in dialect. For example, when Lorissa said, 'you used to head water', I did not at first guess that she meant that she used to carry water pots on her head. Reading at a normal pace it is therefore easy to miss a lot. Secondly and more fundamentally, Chamberlain's grouping of the life stories into five families means that most of them are rather short, and the unit of comprehension is the family rather than the individual. In practice it requires a leap for most of us to think like that. I suspect that the full impact of the interviews could have only been achieved with a more openly expressed editorial thread to guide the reader. And it would have certainly helped immensely to have been given visual aids, such as photographs and maps and above all family trees. Without this, I felt I could not fully grasp the complexity of the structures of these successive families. And so while the testimonies certainly spoke to me at important moments, I never felt carried forward by the current of a powerful narrative as I had when first reading *Pedro Martinez*, or more recently, with Jung Chang's Chinese three-generational study, *Wild Swans*. Ultimately the importance of this book is not as personal experience, as history like a kind of autobiographical novel, but for its analytical novelty.

It makes historical contributions in three major directions. The first is in demonstrating the role played by local cultures in the genesis and scale of outward and return migration flows. The second is in exploring the differences between male and female experience of migration. And the third is in showing that family and intergenerational influences are key elements in the dynamics of migration.

Despite the relatively recent introduction of some more cultural perspectives by researchers such as Paul Gilroy or Catherine Hall, most writers on migration still conceive of the essential processes as being shaped almost exclusively by the combination of economic and political factors: by the push of economic difficulties at home, the pull of work opportunities abroad, and the chance offered by a door legally open for migrants. But this does not explain why people from some cultures frequently migrate, while others rarely do so. The immense global migration patterns of the contemporary world are in fact dominated by a surprisingly small number of places of origin. In England, for example, nine out of ten of those running Indian restaurants are Bengalis from the single town of Sylhet in the Ganges delta, whose men had earlier, perhaps encouraged by the floodwaters which regularly inundate its territory, become internationally known as seamen. Barbados is another country which has been exporting high proportions of its population throughout the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s one eighth of its entire population came to Britain, a much higher proportion than from any other West Indian island. Why was it so different?

In practice people make radical life choices - like the decision to migrate - because such choices are seen as possible within their local culture or family tradition: few would otherwise have the imagination to contemplate such a drastic socially unsupported step. Chamberlain argues that the Caribbean was an area of high migration as a whole because of its longstanding cultural traditions, in some senses a legacy of the forced migration for plantation slavery which brought most of its population across the Atlantic, but traditions transmuted since emancipation into part of a local popular vision of opportunity and 'freedom'. Within this wider West Indian culture Barbados was, as Chamberlain shows convincingly, the epitome of such a migratory culture. From her opening quotation - 'our family love to travel' - onwards, we are given countless glimpses of the pervasive encouragement to migration given by family, friends and neighbours. Many had fathers or grandfathers who had traveled to work in Cuba, Trinidad, Panama, Brazil, the United States or Canada as well as to Britain. As one put it, 'Everybody write back, giving you encouragement to come over, to travel. I think, this word "travel", I think that's it. They just want you to travel and see somewhere else'. Jasper recalls how in the 1950s, when his own father had already migrated -

It was a very exciting time because everyone on the island was talking about emigration to Britain. I loved talking to the old fellows sitting under this huge machineal tree, passing these stories on about how they went off to Curaco and they went off to Panama and they was building the canal and they went off to Cuba and Aruba and found the oil. These men were talking about emigration to Britain. It was the new thing.

I remember my dad saying to my mother, 'Look, things in Barbados now are a bit tight, so I would like to emigrate to Britain, but we haven't got the money.' So my grandmother from Jamaica sent the money to my father. I remember him promising my mother that he will go off to England, work hard, and send for her and the children.

He also promised he's going to pay back 'that woman'... - my grandmother...: she was instrumental in getting him to Britain so that, in turn, he could help us to get to Britain.

It was this uniquely intense combination of historical and family tradition, of community approval from the old men telling stories to the young who felt 'travel' was an essential part of growing up, and the network of practical and financial aid from all generations in the family, which made Barbados such a high-pressured generator of emigration.

On the other hand, the very intensity of the local culture had the contradictory effect of also encouraging return migration. One of the exceptional features of Chamberlain's study is precisely that she is able through her family interviews to examine both ends of the migration experience, and why some chose to stay in

Britain while others preferred to return 'home' to Barbados. 'Migrants come from somewhere: they arrive, with a cultural suitcase, made locally.' Return migration is again a general peculiarity of West Indian migration, but especially of Barbadians, whose presence in Britain has as a result fallen markedly since their peak level in the 1960s. Adverse personal experience is of course part of the reason for this. There were certainly some positive stories; many migrants grew personally through their broader experiences, and whether they stayed or went back became absorbed into a complex dual twin-national culture - pioneers, the more optimistic prophets of the future like Anthony Giddens or Homi Bhabha have suggested, of transnational identities in a globalised world, creatively growing 'between cultures'. By contrast, on the other hand, many migrants were very shocked on their arrival to find the welcoming and affluent 'mother country' of which they had dreamt to be dirty, poor, grey, unchristian, racist, and even obscene in the prevalence of open kissing in public. Even when settled, they continued to find progress at work difficult, earned considerably less than they had hoped, and also, especially if migrants from the villages, they bitterly disliked the crowded loneliness of the great cities. As a mother of three, desperate to return home, wrote to a Jamaican official:

Its not so bloody marvelous coming to a strange country with people that don't care whether you live or die... England is not so easy without being able to slave day in and day out... Get me out and you will get the balance of money or else I go mad or commit suicide... Hurry for its bloody murder out here...

Again, however, such individual reactions could not have been converted into a strong return migration flow if there had not been a tradition of return, of homecoming migrants buying free land to build their own retirement houses, of remaining kin ready to welcome them back, and even of official paths to make resettlement easier. Community and family culture was thus crucial in explaining the flows both ways across the Atlantic.

The migratory model has to be refined in a further fundamental way, for as Chamberlain clearly shows it was also shaped by gender. She demonstrates this through an analysis of the differences between male and female storytelling. Men tend to present themselves more as independent actors, autonomous, inspired by a zest for adventure, making sudden decisions and then telling their families; and where they succeed, they exude individual pride. Thus a London Transport driving instructor claimed, 'I made a first, I was the first black man who has ever done it... *That is my story.*' Women by contrast talk in terms of family decisions with serious thought and much planning for practical help. Only a few see themselves as independent, rebellious migrants, 'strong head'. And in contrast to men, they dream much less of return. As Chamberlain puts it, 'there were no old women telling their stories of adventure and heroism, of building the canal, of finding oil, or working the foundries. There were no grandmothers returning from Panama to build the "upstairs house" or buy a fleet of fishing boats'. For women, she suggests, if there is a 'mistress narrative' it is rather to settle somewhere for the long-term, to build a family and to acquire a house: 'own your own house, you know?... You were more independent.' And whatever their dreams, even to get a decent council house could seem like a step towards paradise. 'When I got my own kitchen... that was like heaven'.

Perhaps most original of all, however, is Chamberlain's introduction of the intergenerational family to the understanding of migration processes. Instead of interviewing 85 scattered individual Barbadians in Britain or the West Indies, she has chosen her subjects as transatlantic family clusters, thirty-nine themselves migrants to Britain, twenty of their children also here, and twenty-three of their parents and three children back in Barbados. This carefully chosen sample - also balanced for occupation, education and gender - has provided her with a fresh perspective. Few historians, as she points out, recognise the significance of the family 'in understanding, even driving, historical transmission, behaviour or movement'; instead family is most often seen as a passive reflection of wider class structure and culture. Chamberlain on the contrary proposes 'to see the family as both the tool *and* the material which creates and shapes historical mentalities and identities. It recognises that the family is not merely the bridge, but the conduit, between the individual and the collectivity.'

The West Indian pattern of temporary individual migration, rather than the permanent emigration persistently encouraged by local governments, dates back to the 1830s, the years immediately following

emancipation from slavery. Remarkably too, right from the start as many of a third of these migrants were women. It does seem very possible that this unusual pattern was made possible by the pattern of West Indian family, which has not changed fundamentally since emancipation: a consanguineal pattern, that is, based on an extended network of blood relationships, both 'inside' and 'outside', rather than on the European model of the conjugal couple and nuclear household. Because the West Indian family provided a very dispersed form of potential support for kin, which could stretch across many countries, but at the same time allowed individual members more autonomy, it was clearly particularly suitable both for generating and sustaining outward and return migration.

Equally important, Chamberlain shows how within the overall culture each of these Barbadian families also display important diversities in their particular stories, myths and practices. In using this form of interpretation she is deploying ideas which were first developed by the family psychiatrist John Byng Hall - inspired by his own personal experience of traditions, almost compulsive 'scripts', going back to the shooting of Admiral Byng for cowardice after the loss of Minorca in 1754 - and more recently developed by Daniel Bertaux and myself in a series of studies of families and social mobility in Britain, France and Russia. This approach has not been used before in migration studies, and *Narratives of Exile and Return* shows clearly that it not only makes sense in this new context, but opens up exciting new perspectives and questions. If we take the families studied in detail, for example, it turns out that only one takes as its theme the 'love to travel' in all three generations; another is rather a story of successive failures, and hence of forced returns; and a third, by contrast, is of setbacks and betrayals - being abandoned, or 'robbed' of an inheritance - which are successively overcome, again in each generation. Most particular of all is a family which traces its 'specialness' six generations back to a sole white ancestor, and uses this to explain why they migrated by unusual paths, settled successfully, but then returned to buy their own independent land: essentially, because they were 'not the labourer type of person.'

I am left entirely convinced by the importance of these innovative approaches. But at the same time - and I think that ultimately this is more a compliment than a criticism - I long for the work to be taken further down the path which Chamberlain has opened. This is above all true of the intergenerational family dimension. We need to know whether there are clusters of different kinds of family traditions, what they are, how they relate to class and place, and how they shape their members' lives. We also need to develop ways of describing these families, which are inherently so much more difficult to grasp than individual biographies: the equivalent to the statistician's shorthand graph. Now that Mary Chamberlain has opened the door, I hope that she will not only come back with a thicker and more broadly-based book herself to follow up this fascinating starter, but that other historians will quickly follow her down the path.

January 1998

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The author has accepted the review, and is pleased with its content, feeling that no further comment is necessary.

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