

## The Other Windrush

'This illuminating, vivid volume is a fitting tribute to the experiences of migration, struggle and celebration that shaped those communities born out of the system of Caribbean indenture.'

—Hanif Kureishi, author of *The Buddha of Suburbia*

'Through moving and insightful stories and testimonies, the legacies of indenture are powerfully inscribed.'

—Hannah Lowe, author of *Long Time No See*

'This kaleidoscopic survey illuminates corners of modern Britain that have been overlooked. Filled with vivid stories about the Chinese and Indian contribution to Caribbean culture, it is also a vibrant history of immigration to the UK: a colourful work in every sense.'

—Sibghat Kadri QC

'I cried when I read this beautifully furious book on the life, loves and heroic struggles of my brave ancestors, the unfree indentured Indian and Chinese men and women who have been consciously and cruelly written out of British and Caribbean history.'

—Heidi Safia Mirza, Professor of Race, Faith and Culture  
at Goldsmiths, University of London

# The Other Windrush

Legacies of Indenture in  
Britain's Caribbean Empire

Edited by  
Maria del Pilar Kaladeen  
and David Dabydeen

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# Introduction: ‘My Father’s Journey Made Me Who I Am’

*Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and David Dabydeen*

Despite the strong sense of Caribbean identity that connects the contributors to this book, many of us have experienced, throughout our lives, the blank looks of those who have struggled to place us when we respond to that most loaded of questions, ‘Where are you from?’ Far too few people in the United Kingdom know about the system of indenture in the Caribbean and the people of Chinese and Indian descent that it left in the region. Fewer still are aware that alongside African-Caribbean people, the descendants of these indentured labourers formed part of the Windrush generation of migrants from the region to Britain during 1948–1971.<sup>1</sup> While this book reflects on the challenges experienced by a community who have effectively lived their lives as a minority within a minority, it is also a celebration of what has been made possible in spite of our invisibility to the general population and through the creative ways we have resisted the silence that surrounds our cultural history.

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1 It is important to note that ships carrying Caribbean migrants arrived before this date. However, the 1948 Commonwealth Act, which reaffirmed the right to British nationality of citizens of the Commonwealth, was an attempt to foster an environment that would enable men and women from across the British Empire to live and work in the UK, fulfilling the nation’s urgent need for labour and helping to rebuild cities devastated by the Second World War. The establishment of the National Health Service in the same year created a significant part of the need for a workforce who largely came from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan. Contributions in this book show how people from the Caribbean responded to this call for labour; coming to train as nurses, work in the army or study for a number of other professions.

From 1838 to 1917, the populations of British Caribbean colonies were transformed by a system of unfree labour called indenture. This system brought Indian and Chinese people to labour on plantations that produced mainly sugar, but also cocoa, coconut and rubber. Although they came to these colonies on temporary contracts, the majority of these workers never returned home, and despite their numbers, their migration story is largely unknown in Britain, the country that directed the fate of these men, women and children. It is unsurprising that Indian-Caribbean and Chinese-Caribbean people should continue to be largely absent from European versions of colonial history. What has always superseded the discussion of Britain's benefit from close to two centuries of African slavery in the Caribbean is the narrative of imperial benevolence that continually draws attention to the British abolition of the slave trade. Traditionally, this narrative has ignored the system of indentured labour that supplanted it.

It is indicative of the entirely venal nature of Caribbean plantation society that alternative sources of labour were sought even before the end of slavery and the apprenticeship system in the Caribbean. Discussions about the possibility of taking Chinese labourers to the British Caribbean took place as early as 1810. Portuguese indentured labourers from Madeira preceded the Indian presence in Guyana (British Guiana), and other groups of European labourers, as well as indentured Africans, were later employed as a replacement workforce. Although the first Indian indentured labourers were brought to Guyana in 1838, they were shortly followed by arrivals to Trinidad in 1845 and later arrivals in smaller numbers to Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and Belize (British Honduras). By far the largest number of labourers went to Guyana and Trinidad. Chinese indentured labourers arrived in Guyana and Trinidad in 1853 and Jamaica in 1854. By the time the indenture system had been abolished in 1917, close to 18,000 Chinese and almost 450,000 Indians had been brought to the British Caribbean.

Indenture in the Caribbean was defined by a clear pattern of abuses against labourers, followed by reforms of the system that were intended to prevent their further exploitation and maltreatment. These rarely addressed the worst abuses of indenture which could see potential recruits deceived about the type of work they would do and the length of the voyage they would embark on. Shipped across the Atlantic to work on plantations for periods of three or five years, labourers were encouraged to re-indenture for a further term, sometimes with the promise of land in lieu of a return passage. The indentured frequently occupied the same meagre shacks which had housed the enslaved Africans before them. Strict labour laws bound workers to the plantations, and governmental inquiries brought to light repeated cases of plantation managers and overseers abusing their authority by physically attacking and sexually exploiting the workers. The workers' resistance to what can only be described in many cases as a semi-penal existence can be traced in records that show their ability to organise against oppressive plantation managers. This resistance meant that the system frequently teetered insecurely rather than confidently, and was punctuated by strikes and uprisings.

Within decades of the inception of indenture, a minority of Chinese-Caribbean and Indian-Caribbean people were able to access schools and liberate their children from the plantation system. In a few cases they were able to go overseas for tertiary education. Accordingly, even before Indian-Caribbean migrants left the region as part of the Windrush generation, an Indian-Guyanese man named William Hewley Wharton had completed his study of medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1899 and returned to the colony to work as a doctor. The Chinese-Trinidadian bacteriologist Joseph Lennox Pawan, whose work on rabies had global significance, also studied at Edinburgh University, completing his degree in 1912. Achievements like this are likely to have been a source of inspiration to others, who saw in Britain a place where they might access higher education and

wider opportunities. There is no doubt that these ideas filtered down to many in the Windrush generation, and this idea was explored in a recent article by the academic Heidi Safia Mirza, the daughter of an Indian-Trinidadian who arrived in England in 1951 aboard the *Columbe*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that they have emerged from a little-known community, descendants of indenture have participated in the formation of a British Caribbean identity from the earliest moments of their arrival. It is widely recognised that the National Health Service (NHS) is indebted to the workers of the Windrush generation, and a number of contributors to this book (Mr Gee, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen, Nalini Mohabir, Jonathan Phang and Bob Ramdhanie) had parents or relatives who worked in the NHS. Indian-Trinidadian novelists Samuel Selvon and V.S. Naipaul, who both arrived in the UK in the 1950s, ignited literary fires that inspired later Windrush writers like David Dabydeen, whose poetry volume *Coolie Odyssey* (Watton-at-Stone, UK: Hansib Publications, 1988) is a journey into the double migrations of Indian indenture and Windrush. Dabydeen's work as an academic and writer was made possible not only by the creation of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick in 1984, but also through the establishment of publishing houses which supported the work of Caribbean writers and scholars.

Jeremy Poynting's Leeds-based Peepal Tree Press, for example, published work by the Chinese-Guyanese writers Jan Lowe Shinebourne and Meiling Jin. Jin's poetic work *Gifts from my Grandmother* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1985), deserves a special mention here, not merely for the spare, precise and powerful poetry, but also for its important recounting of Jin's early experiences of life in the UK as a Windrush child of Chinese ancestry. Peepal Tree's contribution to Indian-Caribbean litera-

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<sup>2</sup> "‘The Golden Fleece’: The *Windrush* Quest for Educational Desire", [www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/the-golden-fleece-the-windrush-quest-for-educational-desire](http://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/the-golden-fleece-the-windrush-quest-for-educational-desire), accessed 6 January 2020.

ture through the publication of authors, both in Britain and in the Caribbean, is unparalleled. Indian-Guyanese Windrusher Arif Ali, who founded Hansib Publications in 1970, played an important role in the academic development of Indian-Caribbean studies (led by David Dabydeen and Clem Seecharan<sup>3</sup>) in the UK. In 1987, Hansib published the ground-breaking *India in the Caribbean* and *Benevolent Neutrality: Indian Government Policy and Labour Migration to British Guiana, 1854–1884* and republished one of the founding texts of indentureship studies, Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920*.<sup>4</sup> The first two of these books were timed to commemorate 150 years since the arrival of the first indentured labourers in Guyana in 1838, and alongside publications in the University of Warwick-Macmillan Caribbean series, became key texts for the next generation of indenture scholars.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond educational institutions, Roy Sawh and barrister Rudy Narayan – whose life journalist Lainy Malkani reflects upon in this anthology – focused on work that can be interpreted as expressions of solidarity with African-Caribbean communities who bore the brunt of the institutional discrimination that marked life in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s – Sawh through his public speaking at Hyde Park during 1958–1989, and Narayan through his legal work from his offices in Brixton. Their efforts defied the divisive politics that marked Guyana following the race riots of the 1960s (see Elly Niland's Chapter 3 in this volume) and which feature heavily as the inspiration behind the work of spoken word poet Mr Gee in Chapter 10. Bob Ramdhanie's oral history interview in Chapter 5 goes some way to showing a con-

3 Professor Clem Seecharan was Head of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at London Metropolitan University between 1993 and 2012.

4 Originally published by Oxford University Press in 1974.

5 This work has culminated in the establishment in 2020 of the Ameena Gafoor Institute for the Study of Indentureship and Its Legacies. Based in the UK, it is the first centre of its kind.

temporary audience what Tao Leigh Goffe refers to in Chapter 8 as the ‘strategic essentialism of Black as a political identity’ at this time. As Mr Gee’s chapter shows, however, these early solidarities became harder to locate in the decades that followed, and he reflects on this in his recounting of life in the 1990s as the child of an African-Ugandan father and an Indian-Guyanese mother.

In 2018, the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks was marred by revelations that elderly and vulnerable members of the Windrush generation and their children were wrongly threatened with deportation, and in some cases incorrectly removed from the UK. The justifiable public outrage over these events surprised the current government, whose creation of an annual Windrush Day (21 June) was interpreted by many as a hasty scramble to repair the severely damaged public relations that resulted from these tragic events. Both the anniversary and the scandal have prompted a movement towards a wider understanding of the Windrush generation and its lesser-known histories. The Migration Museum’s 2017–2018 exhibition *No Turning Back: Seven Migration Moments That Changed Britain* displayed the family history of one storyteller who was both a descendant of Indian indentured labourers and the child of a Windrush migrant. The British Library’s online exhibition *Windrush Stories* includes accounts of the experiences of descendants of indenture, and Charlie Brinkhurst Cuff’s *Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children* (London: Headline, 2018) contains tales by Windrush children of Chinese, Indian and Jewish descent.

While this anthology focuses on the mobilities and migrations triggered by the creation of the system of indenture in the case of Guyana, indigenous people of Amerindian heritage also migrated to the UK as part of the Windrush generation. Notable examples include the writer Pauline Melville (winner of the *Guardian* Fiction Prize and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize) and the

artist George Simon (winner of the Anthony N. Sabga Award for Excellence).<sup>6</sup>

Speaking about the first generation of Indian indentured labourers to the Caribbean, historian Clem Seecharan has used the term 'collective amnesia' to describe the community's silent agreement to forget the complex reasons that motivated each individual departure from India. The work of historians focusing on these varied 'push factors' tells us that these could include severe poverty, famine, domestic violence, a need to hide from authorities or being coerced by recruiters. Jan Lowe Shinebourne's excellent novel *The Last Ship* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 2015) is an exploration of the roots and consequences of similar modes of forgetting in a Chinese-Guyanese family. As far as the children of the 'Other Windrush' are concerned, these first-generation silences could sometimes be fortified by their own parents' reticence to discuss their early lives in the UK in order to shield their children from painful stories of discrimination. While understanding their origins, this book seeks to challenge these silences, sharing aspects of the stories of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, and showing how much our own lives have been defined by the bravery that motivated their multiple journeys, and their lives.

The seeds of this anthology were sown in 2017, when the editors convened an oral history panel at the University of London to amplify the voices of descendants of indenture who were also part of the Windrush generation. Sharing aspects of her father's voyage across the Atlantic with the audience, Heidi Safia Mirza reflected on what this meant for her. 'My father's journey', said Mirza, 'made me who I am.' One cannot look upon Mirza's work as an academic who has sought to expose the injustices encountered at the intersections of race and gender and not immediately

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6 In her essay 'Wearing Where You're at: Immigration and UK Fashion' in *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2016, pp. 144–58), writer Sabrina Mahfouz shares the story of her Guyanese grandfather, of Amerindian and Madeiran heritage, who came to the UK in the 1950s.

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understand that her comment encapsulates the understanding that at its best, to be part of the Windrush generation was to belong to a community of resisters whose support for one another operated in defiance of the hostile environment recounted here.