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Settlers at the End of Empire: Race and the Politics of Migration in South Africa, Rhodesia, and the United Kingdom

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Reviewer: Duncan Money

The image that Jean Smith opens her book with is an apt one. A 1969 *Evening Standard* cartoon depicting a South Asian family and a white British family passing each other on a beach, a boat pulled ashore in the background with the caption, ‘Agreed then, you have 14 Upper Pinner Road, we take the boat, and the best of British luck to you!’ (p. 2). This is one indication that something once common knowledge has now been largely forgotten: that Britain was until very recently, and for centuries before that, primarily a country of emigration.

This forgetting is a curious development and requires a re-imagining of what was a collective experience as something relating to individuals. Almost everyone in Britain has family abroad and usually in former imperial destinations, a cousin in Australia, aunt in Vancouver, etc. It is a collective experience of people in Britain. It is also the story of Smith’s own family, as she explains in the introduction. She was born in Johannesburg to a father who had emigrated to the region as a child and later in life she moved to Britain.

Two sets of migrants appear in the *Evening Standard* cartoon, one arriving while the other is departing. Mass emigration occurred alongside the much better-known post-war immigration. Angst and anger over this immigration has been one of, if not the, key features of British political life for my entire adult life, and in the popular imagination migration is about people coming to Britain. ‘Migration’ means the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948, not the *Carnarvon Castle* departing Southampton for Cape Town at the same time. The same is true of academic work. Studies about Britain and migration in the latter part of the 20th century are overwhelmingly studies about migration *to* Britain, from the Caribbean, South Asia, and other places, and consequent demographic and cultural change. Studies of emigration *from* Britain usually focus on the 19th century and end with the First World War.

Smith’s book is therefore a very welcome contribution. From 1946 to 2000, 8 million people left Britain, and many went to imperial, or what were increasingly ex-imperial, destinations. One great accomplishment of this book is showing how commonplace and normal this was. Adverts were placed in local newspapers to encourage would-be emigrants, and residents of Salisbury, for instance, could glance across adverts in the *Wiltshire Times*

showing vacancies for motor mechanics, pharmacists or typists in a city with the same name in Rhodesia (present-day Harare) (p. 109). Even if they did not themselves go, they were aware that the opportunity was there.

The focus of this book is on the most contentious ex-imperial destinations: South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). For most of the 20th century, these states were ruled by white minority regimes and, from the middle of the century, were subject to increasing international condemnation and sanctions. Both regimes were eventually overcome by the African nationalist movements they sought to violently suppress, but only after lengthy and bitter struggles.

Only a small minority of emigrants from Britain went to Southern Africa. As in previous decades, most went to Canada and especially Australia, where funding for assisted migration continued until 1972. Smith makes a convincing case for focusing on Southern Africa, where political separation in the post-war years had obscured enduring connections maintained through movements of people. Migration to Southern Africa, Smith emphasises, increased markedly in the 1960s even as Rhodesia and South Africa were isolated diplomatically. Histories of apartheid and violent decolonisation in Southern Africa cannot be disentangled so easily from British history in the same period.

This is a transnational history, following comparative developments chronologically in each of the three countries. South Africa and Southern Rhodesia make for obvious points of comparison, albeit a lopsided one. (1) Rhodesia—with a white population at its peak of around 280,000—was memorably dismissed as a ‘suburb masquerading as a country’, but their counterparts in South Africa numbered in the millions (there were more white settlers in South Africa than in New Zealand).

The place of Britain in this comparative framework is less clear. Smith argues that the comparison shows there were close similarities in the immigration policies of each country and that this was because these policies aimed at a demographic defence of a nation imagined as white. This is self-evidently the case in Southern Africa, but can the decision by the increasingly cash-strapped Britain to withdraw funding for assisted emigration schemes best be understood as a demographic defence of white British nation (p. 142)? I’m not convinced. Smith does note that policies were not exactly the same in each country, and argues they had a ‘family resemblance’ (p. 7), an illuminating phrase that also nicely evokes the idea of the ‘Commonwealth family’ then promoted by the British Government.

This argument about a shared history of racialised migration is most clear and convincing in the immediate post-war period, and the weight of the book’s narrative is on the post-war years with three chapters covering the 1940s and 1950s compared with one chapter for the period 1970 to 1994. The years immediately following the Second World War were the highpoint of migration from Britain to Southern Africa and there is an ugly symmetry between the encouragement of post-war emigration of white veterans to the empire and the removal of Black and Asian veterans and sailors from Britain. Migration policies were co-ordinated by governments then still within an imperial system.

Britain made strenuous efforts to maintain this imperial connection. Several reflections on the life of Queen Elizabeth II quoted the speech she delivered on her 21st birthday where she declared ‘my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service’, but then omitted the next part: ‘and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.’ The speech was delivered in Cape Town in 1947 during a two-month long Royal tour of South Africa and Rhodesia. Some years ago, I interviewed an elderly former colonial official in Lusaka who had witnessed the arrival of the Royal Family in Cape Town in 1947, with King George IV greeting the crowds thronged on the quayside from atop the guns of HMS Vanguard, the last of the Royal Navy’s battleships. In terms of symbolism, it’s hard to beat. ‘Those were the days’ he repeated, ‘those were the days.’

There were no further tours by the monarch though, and the post-war surge of migration in Britain was short-lived. The following year saw the election of the National Party who in 1961 organised a referendum for

South Africa to become a republic. Rhodesia followed suit in 1969. Smith argues that these political changes have obscured broader continuities around immigration policy. Settler states in Southern Africa, to put no finer point on it, were discriminating in the kind of settlers they sought to attract. Notably, South Africa did not participate in the subsidised migration schemes established by the 1922 Empire Settlement Act that helped pay for the passage of over 400,000 people from Britain to imperial destinations over the following 15 years. The same official reticence towards migration continued in the 1940s and 1950s.

Yet there was a sharp and decade-long drop in migration from Britain after 1948 and it seems like a remarkable coincidence if this did not have something to do with the election of the National Party. The argument that 'historically high numbers' of white migrants arrived during the 1950s only works in comparison to the interwar period (p. 85). Immigration in the 1950s was lower than the years immediately after the First World War (almost 23,000 white migrants arrived in South Africa in 1920, including 19,100 Brits) and was much lower than at the beginning of the 20th century. Some 40,000 white migrants arrived each year from 1900 to 1909 after the region was forcibly incorporated into the British Empire and the gold industry expanded. White immigration in the first decade of apartheid was much lower than before or after.

Nevertheless, it is likely that the role of politics has been overemphasised and Smith offers an important corrective by going beyond politics to look at the role of wartime experience in shaping migration patterns. Chapter Two explores a little-appreciated aspect of the Second World War and the consequences of this. Geographical distance from the main theatres of conflict meant that Southern Africa became a respite stop, transport hub and military training centre for several million Allied service personnel. A few happy days on the sand in Durban away from shattered cities and shortages in Britain left many with fond memories. This is what South Africa and Southern Rhodesia must have brought to mind for a generation of people in Britain after the war.

Immigration from Britain hit a low in 1961 (when British nationals constituted only 14% of white migrants), the year of South Africa's republic referendum. The previous year, South Africa had experienced a net loss of white migrants for only the second time in the post-war era. However, this presaged a surge in migration from 1963 and migration rates remained relatively high even as the apartheid regime became more openly oppressive and cracked down harshly on opposition. Positive wartime memories might have eclipsed this image of violence.

Increased migration was partly because South Africa and Rhodesia slackened previously selective immigration policies and initiated recruitment schemes for white migrants. The book also links this migration to changes within Britain, showing the connection between post-war immigration and emigration from Britain. At the same time as immigration into Britain became more visible in the 1960s, emigration increased. This was no coincidence, at least for some of the people quoted in the book. Smith quotes from several people who openly stated that they left Britain for Southern Africa because of non-white immigration to Britain (p. 131). Clearly, it is not the presence of Black or Asian people that was so objectionable, as whites were only ever a small minority of South Africa's population, but their social position. Black South Africans would not become their neighbours or colleagues, except as permanent subordinates.

In Chapter Six Smith discusses the comparatively unusual phenomenon of a progressive campaign against migration as Britain's anti-apartheid movement sought to discourage emigration to South Africa by highlighting the oppressive nature of the state. The stated motivations of many emigrants suggests that this campaign did not make much of an impact on their intended audience. The British anti-apartheid movement was large and well-organised, but Smith makes the important point that this is not the full picture. Many were clearly sympathetic and British migration to South Africa peaked again in the early 1980s at a time when the South African regime implemented the Total Strategy that intensified repression.

Race played a more understated role in another motivation for migration. Smith argues persuasively that physical mobility was combined with aspirations for social mobility, an argument that is applicable much more widely. Aspirations for social mobility were often racialised. As one British mechanic put it, one

advantage was 'lots of black people standing around to do the work... Your wife could do things apart from slave and do the housework and you had a gardener as well' (p. 130). Propaganda produced by white minority governments to encourage would-be emigrants emphasised this, and Smith utilises these effectively as a source.

However, social mobility was not automatic and many migrants were frustrated when the anticipated or promised social mobility proved unobtainable. This experience was a common one, as has been detailed recently by Nicola Ginsburgh.⁽²⁾ White migrants were not simply pawns to be attracted and deployed in defence of white minority rule by governments but had agency. The book includes several illuminating examples of what migrants themselves did when social mobility did not transpire. These include a protest led by unemployed Scottish bricklayers who claimed they had been deceived with promises of well-paid employment and marched to the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Salisbury (an astutely chosen spot) and began a hunger strike (p. 112). Smith notes that these problems indicate why the Rhodesian authorities were so selective about migrants, but more pertinently it shows that the promised social mobility was often a myth.

The final narrative chapter turns to the questions of identity following decolonisation. Political events moved rapidly in the region. A British emigrant to Rhodesia in the early 1970s arrived in a region that was entirely controlled by white minority and colonial regimes. Within twenty years, all of these had collapsed. The focus here narrows to those who had lived in Rhodesia and Smith records a diversity of experiences, though there is a common narrative of serial migration, a sense of dislocation, uncertainty about national identity (that had been certain in formative years) and anxieties about accent. Identity was often flexible: one man narrating his life recalled thinking 'we'll go and sort out these pommie bastards' (p. 178) after Rhodesia declared independence in 1965 and then 20 years later saluting the Union Jack at a party he helped organise in Durban to celebrate the royal wedding in 1986.

Smith writes thoughtfully and reflectively on this, while remaining alert to some of the faintly ridiculous elements. The annual meetings of the Rhodesian Association of the USA in Las Vegas are decorated with inflatable crocodiles in the swimming pool. What I felt was missing here was a discussion of the practicalities of migration, as none of the interviewees quoted mentioned any real logistical or bureaucratic difficulties in their serial migrations. The world remained open for them. Her interviewees often felt that they 'didn't belong anywhere' (p. 181) or were 'displaced and unmoored' (p. 188) but they chose to move and were able to do so. The relative ease with which they moved contrasts sharply with the experiences of the millions of Zimbabweans who sought to escape the economic collapse and political turmoil of the 2000s.

The book is appended with a brief epilogue connecting the arguments of the book to events of the recent past like the Windrush Scandal. It's a shame that there isn't a longer conclusion. Each chapter has its own conclusion briefly summarising the arguments made and a fuller conclusion could have drawn these together, and discussed some of the wider implications of these arguments. Could the same arguments be extended to Australia and New Zealand, for instance? Both countries maintained migration policies that explicitly sought white settlers until the 1970s. Broadening the argument has implications for why and when these migration regimes came to an end though. In Southern Africa the answer seems straightforward. While the book makes a persuasive case that migration patterns continued after post-war political separation, other political events had consequences for migration. The collapse of white minority rule in Rhodesia in 1980 and South Africa in 1994 did end white migration schemes. Other former settler colonies did not experience the same kind of reckoning.

A lot more could be said on the topic and I hope that this book encourages people to think about migration beyond immigration to Britain. The way this book brings together histories of immigration and emigration from Britain, and shows how these were often intertwined, makes this an important contribution to British and imperial history, as well as a counter to contemporary understandings of migration. Migration flows connected Britain to former colonies for many years after the political connection was severed and, in the case of Southern Africa, these colonies disowned. The departure of white migrants from Britain is seen as unremarkable, almost part of the natural order of things, and therefore often not remarked upon. Smith

reveals the deliberate policies, funding schemes and ideology that made this seem the case.

Notes

1. Developments in the two colonies mirrored each other and Southern Rhodesia almost became a province of South Africa. Abraham Mlombo, *Southern Rhodesia–South Africa Relations, 1923–1953: Political, Social and Economic Ties* (Cham, 2020).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nicola Ginsburgh, *Class, work and whiteness: Race and settler colonialism in Southern Rhodesia, 1919-79* (Manchester, 2020)[Back to \(2\)](#)

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