



From Jamaica to England revisited - Blanche Blackwell and the joys of reading obituaries

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From Jamaica to England revisited – Blanche Blackwell and the joys of reading obituaries



The Roving Reader Files

Posted on **12/12/2017** (<https://aiucentre.wordpress.com/2017/12/12/from-jamaica-to-england-revisited-blanche-blackwell-and-the-joys-of-reading-obituaries/>)

You may remember I invited us all on a journey **From Jamaica to England** a little while ago. We were accompanied by a whole range of individuals, learning about their experiences of migration as preserved in primary and secondary sources you can find right here in the Centre.

Educated and uneducated, men and women, Black and ‘middle-class brown’ – each had something significant to tell us about the hardships involved in giving up their homeland to travel across the seas to what you’d think might be a better future...



Image courtesy tpsdave

(<https://pixabay.com/en/sea-ocean-sunset-boat-ship-water-67901/>)

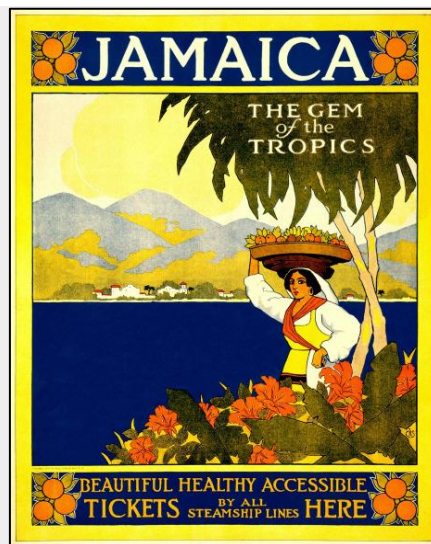
Well, I was reminded of our journey back in August as I leafed through some obituaries over breakfast. Now, what’s so good about obituaries? Not a lot, you’d think, given that their purpose is to tell all and sundry that yet another person has died. Whilst that might not be the best news we’ll ever hear, I have to say I’ve always found obituaries fascinating. As a kind of secondary source, sometimes they open up a window into a different world, a different era – just enough to spur us on to find out a little bit more.

And that's what happened to me whilst I was eating my cornflakes, and I'd like to share that experience with you...

When we travelled from Jamaica to England, there was one community from which we heard nothing directly, although despite it's small size, it has influenced the lives of everyone who's ever called Jamaica home. Which community was that? The white community. This fact struck me like a bolt from the blue as I realised I'd begun to read the obituary of a white Jamaican who died aged 104 – [Blanche Blackwell](#).

So who was Blanche Blackwell? Whilst it seems she's probably best known for her friendships with playwright Noel Coward and James Bond author Ian Fleming, it was other aspects of her life that caught my attention. As part of the tiny white Jamaican elite, she was born into the privileged wealthy Lindo family at a time when colonialism was still in full swing.

People of solely white European descent are even now much less than 1% of Jamaica's population. Yet it has been that small elite which has determined the social structure of the island, benefiting most from the agricultural and other riches the fertile lands in the Caribbean have so abundantly produced.



Thomas Cook travel poster from 1910. Image courtesy Prawny (<https://pixabay.com/en/vintage-retro-poster-travel-1706222/>)

When I say 'white community', don't think that means everyone's from the same racial background. No. The white community's as varied as any other. In amongst them you'll find people of Irish, Scottish, Spanish, German and Jewish descent. It was from the last grouping that Blanche's forbears originated.

How on earth did a Jewish population get to Jamaica? Well, during the sixteenth century, Sephardic Jews were fleeing religious persecution in Spain. Some settled in South America, and individuals established themselves in Jamaica whilst it was still under Spanish rule. When Oliver Cromwell claimed the island for England in 1655, he dispossessed and expelled the Spanish, but encouraged the Jews to remain.

Blanche's forbear Alexandre Lindo arrived in Jamaica in the 1760s, becoming a merchant and making a vast fortune from shipping and slaves. Although this wealth was lost to business reversals, the Napoleonic Wars and the abolition of slavery, Alexandre's son Frederick revived the family fortunes by investing in banana plantations in Costa Rica. It was there that his granddaughter Blanche was born in 1912, before moving with her parents back to Jamaica as one of the richest families in the so-called Jamaican 'plantocracy'.

All well and good. We'd be forgiven for thinking what a nice life that must have been, compared to those of the friends we met on our trip from Jamaica to England. Yet being a white did have its drawbacks. Blanche later recalled a childhood of isolation and loneliness. It wasn't all fun and games, especially when you were tutored at home, your strict mother thought no-one was good enough to be your friend, and you were forbidden to even meet people who were Black.

I was reminded of middle-class brown [Joyce Gladwell](#). As the daughter of resolutely middle-class mixed-race teachers, she also was forbidden to mix with Black children or speak Jamaican dialect. Pictures of her white forbears had pride of place in her home, whilst the Blacks were quietly forgotten. White and near-white girls in the elite school to which she later won a scholarship, shunned anyone even remotely Black. Joyce very early took to heart the significance of shades of colour, thanking her lucky stars that she was brown.

The ripple effects of social stratification based on precise shade of skin continue through time. It has taken much suffering, courage and determination for people to struggle towards pride in being Black. When the scars are within the mind, the task becomes even more difficult to achieve...

Blanche went on to get married to Joe Blackwell in the 1930s – non-Jewish military officer and heir to the Crosse & Blackwell food fortune. Although they later divorced, it was not before they had a son – Chris Blackwell. I'm sure the irony would not be lost on previous generations of Jamaicans that this child of white privilege, with the financial help of his mother, founded the highly-successful Island Records label – which produced the recordings of Bob Marley, and did so much to spread the popularity of reggae.



Statue of Bob Marley in Kingston, Jamaica. Image courtesy Avda (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24942405>)

As my bout of obituary reading came to an end, I sat back and pondered on the strange twists and turns of history. The vigour and kaleidoscopic colour of culture thrives on the mixing of ideas, worldviews and artistic endeavour. Wouldn't it be better all round if we accepted each other as we are, rather than trying to impose what we think we and others ought to be?

The Centre exists to help us be informed enough to do just that, and I for one am grateful.