BRITAIN'S MIXED HALF-MILLION

COLIN MACINNES

Auther of 'City of Spades' and other novels

EVERYONE of course now knows that Africans and West Indians have come to live in England in large numbers. What few seem to have realized yet is that this influx has already changed the English race irrevocably.

One may put at 300,000, more or less, the total number of West Indian and West African immigrants during the past twenty years. (I exclude from these notes consideration of several tens of thousands of Commonwealth Asians, since I know very much less about them). For present purposes, this total figure should include even those who have come, then gone: since what I am concerned with here is the possible number of English-born children (born in or out of wedlock) of these visitors; and to help to create a child does not require—needless to say—a lengthy sojourn.

I do not believe that any exact statistics exist of how many such children there may be: since in England, the polite convention that there are no 'colour' classifications would exclude —in a national census, for example—any such computation. But one can without great likelihood of error assess that at least half a million English-born children of partly—and sometimes wholly—African or Caribbean origin are already fast growing up among us. A very few will be entirely of African descent; a somewhat larger number, of purely Caribbean parentage. The great majority will most probably be the children of Caribbean or, to a far lesser degree, African fathers (the African influx being by far the smaller), and of mothers who are chiefly English, though sometimes of other European races—also often of recent immigration—such as Poles, Cypriots and Maltese.

The essential points to grasp about this phenomenon are these:

1. Though Afro-Caribbean blood has certainly entered the English stream for centuries, it has never done so before so fast and in such volume.
2. Though some of the fathers may conceivably return to Africa or the West Indies, the children, save in very exceptional cases, will almost certainly remain here.
3. Even if their fathers, as soon as African and West Indian countries gain independence, may acquire new nationality

status, the children will in most cases remain British; and will also be so considered by the new African and West Indian governments.

4. Whatever anyone else may think—governments, passport officials, even their dads and mums—these children, as they grow up, will (undoubtedly) consider themselves to be as English as anybody else.

5. This whole situation contains vast possibilities of racial harmony, or frustration, inside England for the rest of the century.

To situate the 'problem' (how greatly, in the mid-20th century, we love that word, almost invariably applying it to social perplexities that are man-made and essentially soluble!), let us recall the circumstances of the African and Caribbean immigration to the British Isles.

Before 1939, there existed, chiefly in the dock cities (including London), a small Afro-Caribbean population, partly stable (it is often forgotten that men from both regions served in world war *one* and stayed on after), and partly consisting of transient, or of going-and-coming, merchant seamen. A well-known example of this is the Tiger Bay area of Cardiff—too well known, in fact, no doubt because of its exotic name, and its lavish contribution to British show-business and pugilism. It is this fact that accounts for the presence, in England today, of many young men and women of mixed racial origins who are already in their twenties, if not even older.

Inquiries I have made among Englishmen and women of this category suggest that they had it both harder and, in some senses, easier, than those who have come after them. On the one hand, it was, of course, deemed highly eccentric to contract a 'mixed marriage' thirty or forty years ago; and the children of such unions—not to mention their parents, especially the impulsive English wife—were the victims of much social stigma. On the other hand, these mixed communities were small and homogeneous, they lived mostly in ports which (except at times of frenzy) are usually more receptive to alien races, and the whole situation had not yet been promoted to the perilous status of a 'problem'. In temperament, I have found such of these pioneers as I have met quite outstandingly well-balanced, with broad shoulders naked of the chips that so many kind hands tried in vain to lay upon them. Nevertheless: there is no doubt that all these men and women have known painful experiences, and

have also found themselves—being adults with a foot firmly wedged in either camp—having to carry much of the load for those who were to come to England after them.

The next influx was that of the men who came to England to join the forces after 1939—always as volunteers, which no one in England itself could be (even if he wanted to) because of immediate conscription. As most African volunteers were ordered either to serve at home or, if abroad, in the Far East, the great majority of this group were Caribbeans. (How little one hears, among the endlessly tedious proliferation of 'war memoirs', about what Africans did for England out in Burma, and how West Indians helped protect her on land, sea, and even in the sky!). This wartime immigration was the only one of which one can say we English as a whole found it most welcome. It being, of course, well understood that it was these gallant lads' bounden duty to rally to the mother country in distress, and equally to hasten home as soon as they'd collected their ill-fitting demobilization suitings.

We come now to the massive immigrations of the late 'forties and the 'fifties; which—so far as West Indians are concerned—shows no sign of abating in the decade we have now entered. Let us consider first, however, the smaller African (in fact, chiefly—for various causes—West African) immigration, and the reasons for it: since the motives of these immigrants were in most cases very different from those which impelled the Caribbeans to come here. It is only exceptionally that one may find Africans in England who decided to emigrate because of extreme economic hardship in their homelands: not that poverty does not exist there—indeed, it does—but West Africa, however thickly populated and as yet undeveloped economically, is manifestly rich potentially and very clearly going to be richer. Thus, the male visitors were either seamen, or students, or traders or, in a very great many cases, those in a category with no Caribbean counterpart—young men who were propelled here by a *wanderlust* that possessed so many Africans when, as a consequence chiefly of the war, the world burst suddenly into Africa, the giant awoke and wished to burst out into the world. A subsidiary reason was the desire to escape from the tender emotional and material blackmail with which African family and tribal life enfolds its males: offering them security and status, but at the price of strictly individual freedom. There is, indeed, scarcely a West African in England who would not,

materially, be better off 'back home' (some, indeed, come from homes whose wealth would amaze the citizens of the English slums they live in). If any reader doubts all this, let him question an African who has come here for no apparent 'reason'; and also recall how an identical instinct has impelled young Englishmen to emigrate in the past.

The case of the West Indians is much simpler: they have always been an emigrating people. Their islands cannot hold nor sustain their bursting populations, and a young West Indian (like an Irishman half a century or more ago) must seek his fortune elsewhere to prosper, even to survive. Unquestionably, if immigration into the United States had not been drastically restricted in the late 1940s, or if West Indians could freely have entered other desirable Latin American countries, they would never have wished to come in such numbers to the British Isles. They came here because it was the only door left, if not open, at any rate ajar.

To these, we must add the women immigrants (often forgotten, since racial venom—and even 'impartial' comment—always concentrates obsessively—and revealingly—on the adult male). No one who has been in hospital in England will fail to understand why a great many of them came over: and though no one perhaps loves a nurse (until he has ceased to be her patient), not one of us whom these African and West Indian girls have bullied back to health, can ever fail to be profoundly thankful that they came here. Of recent years (since about 1957, or so), there has also been a growing arrival of West Indian women, for whom their husbands, relatives, or lovers have created homes—however minimal—before summoning them over, frequently saving over years to pay their fares.

From the moment this Afro-Caribbean immigration on a large scale began, it was evident that, between the citizens from the colonies (or former colonies) and the 'mother country', there was a total and disastrous misunderstanding at all levels. To explain the English misconceptions first. One must avoid if one can, I think, the sterile habit of constantly denigrating one's own country's motives; and so one must fairly say that the post-war English nationality enactments, which bestowed identical citizenship on the inhabitants both of the U.K. and of its colonies (and likewise the inter-Commonwealth agreements by which citizens of newly independent nations were to be allowed freedom of access, and even of labour, in our country) were conceived,

in part at any rate, with generosity. But there were, of course, other motives and assumptions. To declare the heartland of the Commonwealth wide open to all its former and present subjects, was a resounding gesture; but it was undoubtedly believed in England that very few (such as seamen, students, and professional and business men) would actually avail themselves of this proffered privilege. (It is also this erroneous belief which explains the curious fact that, whereas an Englishman proposing to visit even a non-independent colony must secure an entry permit and provide substantial guarantees, a colonial citizen coming here has simply to disembark and sign on promptly at the Labour Exchange). Accordingly, when Africans and West Indians began to arrive *en masse*, great was the native astonishment and dismay. Or rather, to be exact, it took some years for the reality of all this to penetrate the national (let alone the governmental) consciousness. It was generally assumed, for far too long (and against the most easily ascertainable evidence), that these gorgeous migrating birds were those only of passage who, having perched admiringly on our isles a moment, would as suddenly fly off again elsewhere.

On the immigrant side, the initial assumptions were as fatally incorrect. The Africans, it is true, though at first surprised and wounded when they discovered everyone was not delighted to see and greet them, soon shrugged their massive shoulders with resigned indifference: for I have yet to meet an African who does not think that to be one is an enviable thing, and that anyone who does not realize this is an imbecile greatly to be pitied. In addition, independence was already in the air, and colonial occupation had been relatively brief: so that there was no real conflict of loyalties, and the oblong blue passport was regarded merely as a matter of provisional convenience. But with the West Indians, it was very different. For generations, they had been nurtured on the idea of England, the distant mother, whose destinies they had shared for more than 300 years: whose history they knew far more intimately than most of us have ever known theirs: and whose language they spoke (embellished and, to my own ear, in many ways enriched) with the intimacy (unknown to Africans) of a cherished mother tongue. England had sent their ancestors to the Caribbean, and had kept them there in circumstances about which they were ready to be indulgent. In spite of everything, they felt themselves to be British: for centuries, they had helped make their mother rich

and strong. Now, nationality laws which this motherland—not they, who had no power to—had just enacted, threw open welcoming doors. Well . . . times were hard, the Americas uninviting, so they would sell up or save, and cross the air or ocean to nestle at this broad maternal bosom. When they arrived, in tropical suits in winter, and with hard savings spent on fares, they found no one to greet them (except whores, rent-sharks and hostile journalists), and the first doors they knocked on, slammed. Even worse: having herself issued the tacit invitation by her nationality enactments, when she found she was taken at her word, mother England (or her press and public) clamoured that the laws were wrong: as if a side losing unexpectedly in a cricket match (a metaphor familiar to Caribbeans) might whiningly complain that the regulations it had devised and imposed itself before the game, should abruptly be altered in the course of play.

It is no less than tragic that this happened, and utterly unpardonable. In the Caribbean there existed, until fifteen years ago, an immense fund of goodwill towards our country. With even the kind of *ad hoc* improvisations that we made, as a nation, a thousand times in 1939-44—with even one welcoming brass band at Waterloo station, a dozen helpful busybodies with brassards, let alone some official canvassing of landladies, and some stiff ministerial and T.U. directives and admonitions—this capital of affection would not have been squandered, as it has been. Alternatively, with the courage of a mean conviction, we could have altered the immigration laws again. As it was, we blamed the immigrants for accepting our own invitation. They have not forgiven this; although, being a resilient and self-reliant people, they have excused more than we deserve.

We English glory in the sending of our sons, through the centuries, to lands far from home. Today, English emigrants demand paid passages and jobs guaranteed. External circumstances, of course, have greatly altered. Nevertheless: our attitude to this particular adventure no longer can be called heroic. And that word exactly fits the courage with which thousands of young West Indians uprooted themselves from homes and families, to set out for our loved and hostile shores.

What, then, is the likelihood that these immigrant groups will ever leave us? Here, once again, we must distinguish between Africans and West Indians. Most certainly, independence has, and increasingly will, lure many young Africans home: assisted,

in point of fact, by free governmental (one-way) passages. In spite of this, a great many will undoubtedly remain here unless unforseeable circumstances, economic and political, should urgently compel them ever to go. I myself know dozens of Africans for whom the call of their homeland—though usually accepted as existing as an abstract possibility—is insufficient to attract them away from homes, girls, kids, and a decade of altered habits. As for the West Indians, although it is true that many have returned home (emigration is always, in part, a to-and-fro affair—I myself came back to England from Australia in a ship half of whose passengers were disgruntled ex-expatriates), I think it extremely unlikely that the majority will ever leave us—even if North and South America were—and it is most improbable—to open wide their gates to them. West Indians (yet another generalization!) are, despite appearances to the contrary among the more footloose fringe, a domesticated, home-loving people; and all over England's cities, they are now thoroughly dug in. Nor should anyone imagine that they can ever easily be panicked into leaving. The disgrace of 1958 in Notting Vale has left London W.10 and W.11 with as large a Caribbean colony as ever. Though happily, increasing prosperity has enabled a great many to move out of that odious doss-house of our capital, with its long and evil history of ingrown strife.

But whatever the parents may decide to do, their children will assuredly remain. One minor—and negative—reason for this is that—as was hinted earlier—the government of, say, Ghana is most unlikely to consider the English-born child of a Ghanaian and of an Englishwoman (especially if illegitimate) to be anything other than an alien. (As a Ghanaian once said to me, not without unattractive relish, "We've looked after your half-caste children for centuries: now you look after ours.") But the real and essential reason which I must hammer home, is that these kids are English: are English by law, by nature, and, most of all, because they feel themselves to be so. Just look at them, and listen: from babies to teenagers in bud, they have been rinsed and shaped into the English mould (in the course of which process, they are, of course, subtly altering it). With our own native children they share schools, gangs, fears, joys, desires, national destinies—and accents. Certainly, they will be exposed to those kinds of human malice whose social pressures can try to force 'mixed marriages', and their human fruits, to conform fatally to stereotypes that ignorant jealousies may seek to will on

them. But these pressures, which can harm, can also toughen and enrich a personality: especially when, as is now at last the case, the infant substance of this social experiment has so many allies of its own age, and among protecting adults of both races. Here much will depend upon the parents' solidarity. Given this, anyone familiar with African or with West Indian families will know that, in the matter of rearing children, it is we who have much to learn from them: most of all in that sage and endearing blend of intemperate love and of intensely personal (never abstract) discipline, which gives to these lucky kids their own enviable mixture of sturdy independence and of fearless deference —of knowing exactly what their place is, at any age, within their family and community.

And how will the older true-born English react to this? That is indeed the question to which I do not know the answer—though for better or worse (I believe better, as will be seen), the 1960s and 1970s will soon show us. Rudyard Kipling—who, one may imagine (but can one ever be quite sure with this prophet of an England which never existed outside his dream of it?), might well disapprove of this latest addition to the mongrel glory of our race—developed, in his vital myth, '*Puck of Pook's Hill*', the notion that England has always resisted invasions, yet always absorbed and profited from the arrival of the invaders. The Afro-Caribbean influx has, of course—unlike those that Puck told of—not been an armed one. But otherwise, in what exactly does it differ from those of the Celts, Romans, Saxons, Normans, Huguenots, Jews, and, of latter years, Poles, Cypriots, or Maltese? If they made, and make us, what we are (which we appear to like, or at any rate be reconciled to, once they have done it), will we adjust ourselves likewise, as a people, to the Africans and the West Indians? Indeed, shall we delight in, one day, and boast of, their fruitful junction with our hybrid ancestry? The answer, I guess, may be yes—subject to one considerable 'if': and that is, if we should come to shed our obsessions about 'colour'.

Very frankly, I do not expect that anyone much over thirty or so today will greet his half million new 'coloured' fellow-citizens with enthusiasm. My hope and belief are entirely in the young. English youth has, as is very well known, a moronic delinquent edge, whose capacity for destruction (and for self-destruction) need not be under-stated—however disproportionately this is over-publicized. (It is amazing how much evil even

a dozen zombies can spread around them, in the contemporary urban scene). On the other hand, such evidence as I have been able to gather suggests to me that the bulk of the young are bored stiff by many of the archaic social preoccupations in which their elders remain sterilely embedded. Cruising around jazz clubs, for example, one will find there young men and women who are sedate, and sharp, and confident—and not in the least admiring (let alone fearing) street-warriors armed with dustbin-lids and milk bottles. The jazz world (whose attendant crop of camp-follower wierdies are—to the bored annoyance of the vast majority—the sole interest of the newspapers) is outstandingly alert, sensible, and positive in its attitudes; and the admired 'greats' of the jazz world are all—or almost all—'coloured' men and women. In this atmosphere, it is not just that it is impossible to be a racialist: the whole conception of such a state of mindlessness seems utterly irrelevant to serious living—'a drag', in fact, than which there is no stronger term of tired scorn. These young Englishmen and women don't just reject such nonsense, as might some well-intending 'liberal' by taking anxious thought. They exist right out and beyond it—on its further untrammelled side.

As the first teenage waves of the 1950s become dads and mums (a great many of them already are), a new lot will arrive, and is arriving. And these boys and girls will have all had the experience (which none of their parents—even those well-disposed—have ever had) of growing up with 'coloured' kids, day after day, as something entirely and naturally familiar in their lives. It is this fact that will affect the whole situation as will no other. These mixed half million will be the catalysts of their own 'problem': please heaven (and with a prudent bow in the direction of Pook's Hill), creating health and sanity around them.