

Looking to London

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Stories of War, Escape and Asylum

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1. London: Magnet for Migrants	9
2. From South-East Turkey to North-East London: Kurds in Hackney	31
3. From the Horn of Africa to the Isle of Dogs: Somalis in Tower Hamlets	65
4. Home for Whom? Tamils in Hounslow and Home Office Detention	98
5. The Sudans' Divided People Come to Camden	134
6. Syrian War, Migration Crisis and 'Refugees Welcome' in Lambeth	167
<i>Notes</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	234

Introduction

This book is a celebration of London, but a cautious one. It celebrates the city's famous cultural diversity. It celebrates the generations of migrants who have made it what it is. And it celebrates the courage of today's many refugees from war, who are helping make a reality of their belief that London welcomes newcomers. The celebration has to be cautious, however, because London is a profoundly unequal place, of obscene wealth and profound poverty, building sky-high palaces while homeless people, among them many refugees, sleep rough on the streets below. We need to remember, too, that today London is a financial centre fostering capitalist exploitation worldwide, and yesterday was the capital of an empire that created the conditions giving rise to wars in Asia and Africa today.

Nonetheless, I have my own reason to value London. I arrived here 63 years ago, as a labour migrant, an ill-informed 19-year-old from the socially conservative, class-ridden and almost wholly white British industrial East Midlands in which I was born. Travelling to the capital in search of a shorthand-typist's pay packet changed the trajectory of my life, entirely for the better. I kept a diary in those days. It tells me that on Saturday, 29 August 1953, my father brought me to London and deposited me and my suitcase in a hostel housing 300 women. That Monday, 31 August, early in the morning I went out onto the pavement and, asking my way from people around me, located my workplace. I was shown to a desk and sat down at the typewriter – one of those heavy manual machines we used in those days. The people with whom, morning and evening, I packed into London's red buses absorbed my attention. Many were, I discovered, labour migrants like myself, but from further afield. Quite a few were Caribbean and Asian, from the Commonwealth.

My first move out of hostel accommodation was into a small flat in Victoria, shared with other women. Next, I lived for a while in a rented room, which I had to myself. My job was in the clerical grades of

government service, and when I reached the age of 21 I became liable to a foreign 'posting'. They sent me to Bangkok, Thailand, to be the secretary of the British Information Officer in the UK Embassy. There, I began to register facts about the wider world of which till then I'd been ignorant. Thailand, one of the few countries in Asia that avoided colonization, taught me what 'imperialism' had meant elsewhere. I had a lesson in 'revolution' too. At the back of a cupboard in the office I found an extraordinarily beautiful photographic portrait of Ho Chi Minh. Who was this man? Learning about North Vietnam directed my gaze towards Mao Tse Tung, and I began to read about the 'long march' of the communists which, only eight years previously, had culminated in the creation of the People's Republic of China. I wanted to go there. I wanted to see for myself. But when the British Embassy learned that I was seeking a Chinese visa, the Chargé d'Affaires stood me on the mat and said 'No way! Not while you're an employee of the British state. Are you defecting or something?' So I resigned my job, got the visa and travelled in China. Those weeks were an important addition to my erratic education. And with a tale to tell, I found I could write.

Back in London in 1958, now with a partner, I settled down in a small rented flat in Primrose Hill. I made a living from freelance journalism while he studied architecture at North London Polytechnic. Behaving, as so many did in those days, in a socially endorsed and orderly manner, we got married (in church, no less) and a few years later had our first child. It was at that point, in 1966, we moved from our flat in Primrose Hill to an address in Kentish Town. Property was cheap in those days, and with only modest help from our families we were able to buy the freehold of a nineteenth-century terrace house. This house became a truly felt 'home' and would, as it turned out, remain my home till the present day, half a century on. I often dwell on this relationship of mine to the concept of home, the comfort, security and longevity that define it. It's what makes me pay such close attention to refugee women as they speak of the homes they have been forced to abandon, and their feelings about the places – tents, bed-and-breakfast lodgings, rented rooms – they've inhabited on their way to achieving a new one.

Wars and refuge from wars began to take on significance for me as my partner and I explored our borough, Camden. We found ourselves among two large migrant communities, Greek Cypriot and Irish. I

INTRODUCTION

remember so well the little Cypriot shop in Inverness Street where we would go for olives and *pitta* bread. Each weekend there would be a wedding in the Greek Orthodox Church at the end of our street. Cyprus was still a British colony then, and many of the older Camden Cypriots had come here as economic migrants. But now some were coming in flight from the fierce anti-imperialist war on the island (remember EOKA?). When independence was won in 1969, refugees continued to arrive, displaced now by the continuing conflict between the ascendant Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriot minority, supported by Turkey, which would eventually result in the division of the island. Around us in Camden we often heard Irish accents too. Of course London had been home to many Irish for decades, indeed centuries. The island of Ireland lies only 20 miles away at the closest point, and was Britain's first colony. But in the late 1960s the Irish Catholic insurgency in British-ruled and predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland, 'the Troubles' as it was called, was getting under way, impelling more Irish across the water.

So, settled in Camden, we were alert to two anti-colonial struggles being lived out in our neighbourhood. However, it has to be said, the main political preoccupation for us in the late 1960s and 1970s was the Cold War, the stand-off between the rival capitalist and communist power blocs that had emerged from the Second World War, both now armed with the 'Atom Bomb'. What got us on to the streets was the menace of the 'nuclear arms race'. The first major march of protest to Aldermaston, in Berkshire, the centre of nuclear weapons development in Britain, took place at Easter 1958. A revived feminist movement had transformed our consciousness during the 1970s, and in the early 1980s feminism found expression within the anti-nuclear movement. Women set up a peace camp at the gates of the Royal Air Force base at Greenham Common in Berkshire, as it prepared to receive US cruise missiles and warheads. The long-lived Greenham women's camp drew thousands to its blockades and demonstrations. As Londoners, we formed local 'Greenham support groups' – the Sirens, the Common Singers – and went at weekends to join the campers, cut the fence and invade the base. And we 'carried Greenham home' to the streets of London.

At this time, and in subsequent decades, I was enabled by help from many encouraging individuals and generous grant-giving bodies

to start writing in a different mode, building a sustainable career in academic ‘action-research.’ I began with a study of local government and its complex relationship with ‘community’, a concern renewed in this present study in the focus on London’s borough councils.¹ The field of gender studies was flourishing in the 1980s. In that decade my theme was men and masculinity in relation to technology, organization and power.² But in the 1990s I began to research and write about women anti-war activists and peace-makers (such as we had ourselves been at Greenham Common), and to seek an understanding of the part played by gender differentiation and inequality in militarism and war. The countries I chose for fieldwork on this theme included, naturally enough, those to which life in London had earlier alerted me. Ireland was one of the first. Cyprus soon after. Bosnia, Israel/Palestine, Uganda, Colombia, the Korean peninsula and the Japanese island of Okinawa were among the others.³

Seeing the effects of armed conflict on individual lives, and the social movements for peace and justice that arise in response, was what made me so conscious of the presence of asylum seekers and refugees among the diverse communities around me at home. I began to distinguish the war-traumatized minority among London’s minorities. And among them, particularly, I noticed women, affected so specifically and profoundly by the militarization of their societies, by masculine violence on every scale, and by displacement. That’s why, in mid-2014, I set out with my free pensioner’s bus pass to meet the generation of women not long-since arrived here in flight from oppression, injustice and war. I wanted to learn more about the conflicts they’d fled, about their journeys, the reception they received here and what’s involved in resettlement. The process, this time, was not research in academic mode, but what I would term ‘engaged documentary’.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

So here’s the way the book is organized. Chapter 1 is about London’s magnetic attraction for migrants from overseas. Well over one in three of resident Londoners today was born in some other country, migrated here, settled – and maybe raised a family. There’s scarcely a country in the world without its representative Londoners. Even Antarctica contributes 13. So I look at how waves of incomers were drawn to the

INTRODUCTION

capital as it grew from a fortified Roman town to a late nineteenth-century industrial capital. Immigration control began in 1905, with racist selective intention. After the Second World War, new controls sought to deter black- and brown-skinned migrants from former colonies, while continuing to admit white Commonwealth citizens. We see how the challenge to the UK border changed markedly in the 1980s and 1990s, with a rapid growth in the numbers seeking asylum from oppression and conflict. A sequence of immigration acts sought to stem the flow by reducing right of entry and creating deterrent reception conditions. As 'terror' became an issue in the following decade, surveillance and security legislation cast asylum seekers as a threat. Affecting London particularly was the introduction in 2000 of compulsory dispersal of incomers to selected regions to take the pressure off the capital. The chapter ends with a look at London's continuing appeal for refugees, local authorities' responsibilities of care towards them, and the strategies of integration and cohesion the boroughs apply.

Next comes the first of four chapters in which I drop to the local level, to look more closely at the experience of a particular London borough and one of its notable minority communities – one that has substantial numbers who have arrived there as refugees in flight from war. Thus, Chapter 2 takes us to the north-east Inner London Borough of Hackney and its well-established community of Kurds. It introduces the Kurds as a people, one that has lived for millennia in a region which today spans the borders of four nation states: Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. In particular we look at the story of those Kurds living in south-east Turkey and their struggle for recognition and minority rights, which since the 1980s has involved an intermittent armed resistance by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (the PKK) against the oppression of the Turkish state. I go on to tell of the flight of Kurdish refugees to the UK and the choice made by many to settle and re-home in Hackney and neighbouring boroughs. In Hackney I meet officers, councillors and some Kurdish community organizations, before tracing the important role played by women and feminism in the Kurdish movement in Turkey and in the thought and writings of the imprisoned Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. I introduce three Kurdish women, now Londoners. The first is Suna, who tells of her imprisonment and torture for Kurdish activism in Istanbul, and her

escape to London. Second is Bercem, who as a child arrived with her parents, stowaways on a Channel ferry. And then comes Turkan, who has continued to pay a price for her commitment to the Kurdish movement, which the UK government deems a terror organization.

Next, to one of the four poorest countries in the world, Somalia, where 73 per cent of the population live in poverty, people are deeply riven by clan, failed governments and armed conflict have prevailed since the early 1990s and, in the last decade, the terror group Al-Shabaab have been a continuing source of violence. Chapter 3 opens with a brief history, follows with an account of recent strife, and then looks at the position of women in Somali society in the past and today. I trace the internal displacement of population, the flight of refugees across the border to camps in Kenya, and beyond to a worldwide Somali diaspora. In the peak year of 1999, Somalis comprised 11 per cent of refugees arriving in the UK. Many followed the steps of early seafaring Somali migrants and settled near the docks in London's East End. I focus in on the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and learn of council policies in relation to their sizeable Somalilander community today. At a Somali cultural event I meet Hinda and Ubah, two young women who experienced war, escaped to the UK in the 1990s, and are now raising families in Tower Hamlets. Illustrating the activism of many refugee Londoners, I introduce Dahabo, who has been prompted by her asylum-seeking experience to become a feminist advocate for women's rights, and is the founder of Voices of Somali Women in London.

The entry point in Chapter 4 is the bitter conflict between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority of Sri Lanka, dominant in the institutions of the post-colonial state, and the Tamil Hindu population dwelling mainly in the north and east of the island. State discrimination against the Tamil minority gave rise to resistance and eventually an armed movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or the Tamil Tigers), seeking an independent state. An exceedingly violent civil war culminated in 2009 in the defeat of the Tigers. Many Tamils fled the country – the UK a favoured destination. I look at the numbers seeking asylum here, and the UK government's resistance to granting it. I home in on a Tamil community in the Outer London Borough of Hounslow, in West London. I explore the council's strategies towards this and its other minorities, and go on to tell the story of Thavarani

INTRODUCTION

(Rani) Nagulendram, founder of the Tamil Community Centre in Hounslow, who experienced the early years of the conflict and came to London in 1991. Now, 27 years on, Rani thinks of London as her permanent home. But some Tamil women are not so permitted. They are imprisoned by the Home Office, awaiting the result of asylum appeals. I draw on critical feminist investigations into Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, and end the chapter with the stories of Veena and Srisivakumar, two Tamil women who recently experienced its un-homely regime, anticipating forced deportation to Colombo where both had reason to fear a renewal of imprisonment and torture.

The fourth borough case study brings us back to north-central London and simultaneously returns us to Africa. Chapter 5 looks at refugees from the Sudan in Camden – the story begins when the Sudan was a single country, though already deeply conflictual. The country is dominated politically by the relatively pale-skinned, Arabic-speaking, Muslim Sudanese of the northern Nile region, who have sought to impose Islamic belief and law on the entire polity. Their despising and repression of the black-skinned 'African' peoples of the south, many of them Christians, led to a prolonged war and, in 2011, the creation of a separate state of South Sudan, where war has continued. Before and since separation, the 'Arab' regime in Khartoum has also engaged in brutal repression of rebellions by Darfuris in the north-west and the 'African' people of the Nuba Mountains in the south-east. We see the effect of these wars on women, in particular the prevalence of rape and other sexualized violence. I introduce Grace, a southern woman who fled the south-north conflict as a refugee in 2000, reaching London with the help of a people smuggler, and settled in the London Borough of Camden, where I got to know her in a Sudanese women's community project. After looking at Camden's policy and practice towards its incoming minority communities, I introduce 'Fatima' and 'Amina', the first of Darfuri origin, the second an inhabitant of Khartoum who was arrested and tortured by the regime for her activism in support of Darfuris. Finally we hear the story of Marwa, daughter of Nuban parents relocated to the capital, where all were active against the regime. A Londoner for ten years now, she remains a Nuban activist.

In early 2017, approaching the end of this documentation of war, flight and resettlement, my narrative in Chapter 6 steps abruptly into the here and now, where I'm living in a city that is challenged by a

surging demand for asylum and deeply divided about how to respond. The eastern Mediterranean region has been experiencing the biggest flow of refugees occurring anywhere since the Second World War. Most are fleeing the current civil war in Syria, while others are driven by prolonged conflicts in other countries – Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea. The chapter opens with the historic causes of the Syrian war, including the part Britain played in laying the groundwork for today's conflict. I trace a trajectory from the popular uprising of 2011 to outright war today, the involvement of international and regional powers, and the impact on women. We move on to the 'migration crisis', and the inability of the states on whose national borders the refugees are clustered to gain the agreement of the European Union countries, and the rest of the world, on a fair and feasible way of 'sharing the burden'. I track the UK's foot-dragging response and miserly resettlement quota. The years 2014 to 2017 have seen, fostered by the movement Citizens UK, the growth of an energetic expression of 'Refugees Welcome', but within a climate of increasing hostility to immigrants of all kinds, manifest in the outcome of the referendum on EU membership and the associated 'Brexit' movement. Then follows an account of a positive initiative of Syrian refugee support and resettlement in the London Borough of Lambeth, involving an energetic partnership between the community activists of Lambeth Citizens (including diverse faith groups working together), local schools and a hands-on charity, working closely with officers and elected members of the local authority. The book closes with the story of a newly arrived Syrian family.

London: Magnet for Migrants

Two things are special about London: its sheer size, and its cultural diversity. With more than eight million inhabitants at the 2011 census, London is eight times more populous than the next biggest UK city, Birmingham, and at least twice as large as the biggest in Europe, Berlin, which has little more than three and a half million. It rivals New York, the most populous city in the USA, a country with five times our national population. London's growth over the last two centuries has been spectacular. Starting with around a million inhabitants in 1801, Greater London had reached three million by 1861, six million by 1901 and by 1931 was almost its present size. It lost a little during the Second World War, but remained fairly steady at between seven and eight million during the remainder of the century, until a notable 14 per cent hike in the first decade after the millennium.¹

The other famed feature of London's demography is the number and variety of Londoners' countries of origin, generating an extraordinary and inspiring range of distinctive looks, life trajectories and cultures in the streets and neighbourhoods of the capital. The census of 2011, the latest we have on going to press, tells us that almost three million (37 per cent) of Greater London's 8.2 million inhabitants are first-generation migrants, individuals who were born in some country other than the UK and have come here during their lifetime. Of this migrant population just over half (52 per cent) are women. A language other than English is the main language of more than one in five Londoners.² In four of Greater London's 32 boroughs, those who are foreign-born make up more than half of the census population. These boroughs are Brent, Kensington and Chelsea, Newham and Westminster. Eighteen of the world's countries have populations of more than 50,000 in London. Six have 100,000 or more – they are Bangladesh, India, Republic of Ireland, Nigeria, Pakistan and Poland.

Bear in mind, besides, that a subsequent generation, children born to these adults since they arrived in the UK, do not feature in the census at all. They may well double the size of these communities.³

Any capital city, or, let us say, any town as it grows to become a capital, inevitably attracts inward migration from near and far. Some is individual, some comes in waves from particular directions, bringing distinctive cultures. In *The Peopling of London*, Nick Merriman reminds us that, situated as we are at the far western edge of the continent, attached to it by a land bridge during ice ages, cut off by sea during periods of warming, 'It is possible to argue that, from early immigrants to the refugees of today, everyone living in London is descended, however distantly, from people who have come from abroad.'⁴ Some stone-age arrivals left their knapped flints and animal bones on the shores of the proto-Thames. When the Romans invaded in 43 CE and founded the walled town of London, they brought with them as soldiers, administrators and slaves people not only from their Italian homeland but from all over the Roman Empire – Greece, Anatolia, Africa. Merchants accompanied them. No doubt many Celts, the island's predecessor-people, lived within the walls of Roman London too, and in the half millennium between the Roman withdrawal and the Norman Conquest, there came Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians and eventually Vikings, from across the North Sea. The historian Bede, writing in the eighth century CE, describes London as 'a trading centre for many nations who visit it by land and sea.'⁵ The Norman Conquest in 1066 brought French lords and lackeys to the capital. Some of these 'French' were Jews, who played a crucial role financing the Exchequer and the ruling class, but were already subject to discrimination, being forbidden to own land, carry arms or employ Christians. In 1290 they were expelled from London, indeed from Britain, altogether. Was this the moment Britain put into effect a state-regulated border, as 'racially' motivated then as it would be 700 years later?

As the capital's population grew in the second millennium of the Christian era, it was mainly by inland migration from the provinces and peripheries. But people were still coming from across the Channel too. Merchants from Italy, Spain, Germany, France and Holland were characteristic inhabitants of London throughout the mediaeval period. Merriman tells of an incident on May Day in 1517 when a mob took to the streets attacking foreigners and destroying their homes