Gemma Romain, *Race, sexuality and identity in Britain and Jamaica: The biography of Patrick Nelson, 1916-1963*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017; x + 264 pp.; £31.30 hbk; ISBN 9781472588654

In the wake of the ‘Windrush scandal’ it is vital that the complicated relationship between Britain and the Caribbean is better understood. Romain’s book offers a window into the ties of identity and history which bind Britain and Jamaica. Using the lens of an individual queer black man – Patrick Nelson - Romain interweaves local, national and imperial narratives. Working across a range of cultural, military, queer and colonial archives, her meticulous work piecing together Nelson’s biography allows the reader to explore both ‘what they reveal and what they do not reveal’ (p. 8). Inevitably when attempting to reconstruct the biography of a subject marginalised by race, class and sexuality, Romain’s narrative is fragmentary in places. As she highlights ‘A life-as-lived can never be recalled by the historian with completeness’ (p. 136). Yet her efforts to reanimate Nelson’s world – his friendships, loves, aspirations and struggles – give voice to a set of experiences that have remained persistently absent from public memory.

The first two chapters document Nelson’s formative years in Jamaica. Undertaking detailed genealogical research, Romain examines his family life in Kingston. She considers the importance of Nelson’s father Leopold’s experiences as both a professional cricketer and as military man in forging ideas about masculinity and colonial identity that were shaped by the practices of inequity which circumscribed black lives under imperial rule. She also considers how his mother Gertrude’s work as a higgler and washerwoman was reflective of the labour of black women in post-slavery Caribbean society. For Nelson, his boyhood interactions with the education system and scoutcraft played an important role in his understanding of the relationship between Britain and the Empire. Romain also suggests that the militarism of the imperial scouting movement may have influenced his decision to join the army in 1940.

With limited opportunities on the island in the 1930s, Nelson embarked on what would be the first of several stints in the service economy. Drawing on the history of the Manor House Hotel, Romain considers how the plantation complex was transformed into the tourist industry whilst maintaining the racialised labour structures which underpinned it. The hotel is considered as both a colonial and a queer space. Romain frames it as a place in which exploitation coexisted with luxury and leisure. The close-quartered living arrangements and the transience of temporary visiting created potential opportunities for sexual encounters. Romain’s exploration of queer Jamaica is part of her historical activism - as her reference to contemporary campaigning LGBT organisations in Jamaica makes clear – this is a claim on historical visibility within Caribbean history.

The third and fourth chapters document Nelson’s experiences in rural Wales and cosmopolitan London. Nelson’s year spent valeting for the Stanley family of Penrhos in 1937 destabilises the notion of the black presence as a post-1948 urban phenomenon. It connects him to a wider sense of working-class identity through the experience of domestic servitude. Following a move to London in 1938, Nelson encountered the Bloomsbury Group artist Duncan Grant who became his lover. It is through Grant’s archive at the Tate that many of Nelson’s letters have been preserved. Romain reconstructs the artistic and literary networks within which Nelson moved as a result of his connection to Grant. The bohemian world of London’s interwar jazz scene is richly recalled, as is the intellectual centre of black life which sprung up around the university campuses in Bloomsbury. Romain’s inclusion of portraits by Grant depicting Nelson form part of a discussion of the relationship between black culture and modernism. Both the images and the letters between the two men speak to an intimacy and affection which sustained their friendship for several decades.

The lack of representation of colonial troops within mainstream histories of the Second World War has been raised in public discourse. In the fourth and fifth chapters Romain records Nelson’s experiences as a soldier and a POW. His time with the Pioneer Corps and his unsuccessful evacuation from Dunkirk are recounted through official war diaries. Details of Nelson’s incarceration in camps in Germany and France offer a fascinating insight into the neglected history of black POWs. In documenting his subsequent struggles with mental and physical health, Romain lays bare the sacrifice made by people from across the empire.

The final chapters deal with Nelson’s life in the post-war period. After returning to Jamaica he struggled to find work and to fit into a deeply religious society in which he could not express his sexuality. Romain notes that despite its rejection of homosexuality, Nelson took solace in the church which provided him with a sense of community. In the early 1960s he went back to London where his story intersected with the dominant narrative of post-war migration. Romain argues that Nelson’s life fits into an analysis of migration that centres affective ties. She frames his relationship with Grant as ‘an example of queer family’ (p. 131) as evidenced by his designation as next-of-kin during the war. Nelson’s return offered Grant the opportunity to paint his friend one last time before his death. Wearied by war and the struggle to make a living, Nelson died of heart attack in 1963.

Romain’s work engages with a subject which can be difficult to access. She is careful to explain her methods and is open and analytical in relation to the silences of the archives. She has produced a work which sheds light not only on Nelson as an individual but on queer histories of Caribbean migration, tourism, domestic labour, art history and the Second World War.

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