

# MIGRANTS TO THE WEST MIDLANDS: A BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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While population studies give us the 'big picture', tracing general trends in relation to migration, it is individual stories which bring history to life and illustrate most powerfully for us some of the factors which lie behind it.



© Birmingham Museums Trust

The experience of migration pictured in Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England*, 1852-5.

## The Search for Opportunity

Perhaps the most famous painting in Birmingham's collections, the Pre-Raphaelite Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England* (1852–5), powerfully evokes the range of emotions among a party of migrants as they leave the chalk-cliffed shores of southern England for a new future in another continent. There is resignation, anger, and bitter brooding among the passengers crammed on the vessel. Provoked by the departure to Australia of a disappointed sculptor friend of the painter, the picture represented circumstances experienced by many Victorian families.

As Connie Wan's recent, unpublished, thesis on a Birmingham artistic dynasty has shown, one of the five artist sons of Samuel Lines, the landscape painter and teacher of art, made a similar decision to emigrate to New Zealand, where he hoped to open an art academy. In his case, as in many others, the home country might offer insufficient opportunities for all the children in large families to make careers and support their own offspring.

Birmingham, and much of the surrounding West Midlands conurbation, was founded on migration, though not so much from across the seas as from neighbouring agricultural regions.

Migration from the countryside has been identified as the cause of the rapid population increase in urban areas of Warwickshire at the turn of the eighteenth century; two-thirds of those coming to Birmingham in search of work in that period came from Warwickshire and Staffordshire. This pattern persisted until late in the nineteenth century. The farmer Joseph Ashby recalled how in the 1890s low rural wages, overcrowded cottages, and endemic unemployment forced young men from the south Warwickshire villages around his native Tysoe to leave for industrial work in Birmingham, Coventry, or Burton-on-Trent. Each village tended to stick to a particular destination, so the migrants' social and family connections were maintained in the places to which they had moved.

## People of Prominence

The migration stories of individuals who came to prominence can be found in sources such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. A snapshot of some of those who were newcomers to the West Midlands in the middle years of the nineteenth century illustrates the opportunities which these expanding urban areas presented.

### *Jesse Collings*

A future mayor of Birmingham and later MP for one of its constituencies, Jesse Collings arrived from Devon in 1850, aged nineteen, as a clerk in an ironmongery firm, where he worked his way up to a partnership. He never, though, lost his sense of having roots in the rural south-west. It was he who coined the election slogan 'three acres and a cow' to signify the aim of giving landless farm workers a stake in the soil. Others embraced industrialisation more unreservedly.

### *Richard Tangye*

The son of a Quaker miner from Redruth, Richard Tangye arrived in Birmingham in 1852 to work as a clerk to a tool manufacturer. He was soon joined by four of his brothers. After

successfully developing the manufacture of hydraulic lifting gear, he established the Cornwall works on initially three acres of land in Soho, later growing to a 30-acre site employing a labour force of 3,000.

### *George Kynoch*

From the other extremity of mainland Britain, George Kynoch had left Peterhead in Aberdeenshire to become a bank clerk in Worcester then Birmingham. He moved into the armaments trade in the post-Crimean War years, manufacturing brass ammunition on a four-acre site in Handsworth, which soon expanded to nineteen acres, prospering from government contracts to make brass cartridges. Like Collings, Kynoch became an MP.

### *Henry Hartley Fowler*

So, too, did Henry Hartley Fowler, a young solicitor from Sunderland, who in 1856 settled in Wolverhampton, where marriage to the daughter of the ironmaster George Benjamin Thorneycroft brought him a partnership in the iron trade, and a leading position in the town's civic life, now commemorated in a heritage trail.

These mid-century migrants to the West Midlands conformed to a more general pattern of moving at an age when they might expect to start families, like the young couple in Madox Brown's painting, and illustrate how migration could have a considerable impact on population growth. They were perhaps exceptional, though, not only on account of their prominence in public life, but also because they were not moving as a result of absolute need.

## The Irish

Those fleeing the potato famine accounted for many of the Irish migrants to the West Midlands in the mid-nineteenth century. The census of 1851 showed that migrants with birthplaces in Ireland amounted to nearly four per cent of the population of Birmingham, comfortably exceeding the number of first-generation migrants from Scotland, for example. The same pattern was revealed in the other major towns in the region: Coventry, Dudley, Hereford, Shrewsbury, Wolverhampton, and Worcester.

Unlike the majority of first-generation Irish migrants, those who rose to prominence in regional or national life were likely to have been well established in various ways when they arrived in the West Midlands. They were also mainly Protestants.

### *Sarah Florry*

Through her autobiography, preserved in the Library of Birmingham, the remarkable trajectory of the Irish businesswoman Sarah Florry comes to light. Born in County Meath in 1744, the daughter of an ironmaster, she came to Birmingham as a child, set up in business as a metal factor in Moor Street, and was eventually successful enough to retire to Edgbaston.

### *James Ryan*

The Irish-born mineral surveyor James Ryan settled in Dudley in 1808, having invented a mine-boring apparatus which not only identified mineral deposits but had a valuable application in improving mine ventilation in the dangerous South Staffordshire coalfield. He nevertheless failed to prosper and died in relative poverty in Dudley in 1847.



Courtesy Chestlyn Hay and District Local History Society



The only surviving image of the Rev'd Shapurji Edalji and his family. From left to right: George, Maud, Charlotte, Shapurji and Horace.

© Birmingham Archives and Heritage



REV. PETER STANFORD.  
(From a Photograph by W. W. Bates.)

Rev'd Peter Stanford, an African American former slave and Birmingham's first Black minister. *Birmingham Faces and Places*, Vol. VI, 1894.

### **Charles MacMunn**

Charles MacMunn, born in Sligo in 1852, qualified in medicine in Dublin, but in 1873 took over his cousin's medical practice in Wolverhampton where he set up a laboratory and made pioneering researches using spectroscopy to study cellular respiration.

### **The Macreadys**

The Dublin-born theatre manager William Macready successfully leased the New Theatre in Birmingham from 1796 until 1808, and established a dynasty which roughly encompassed the period of the union of Ireland with Britain; his son, whom he could afford, briefly, to educate at Rugby School took to the stage, and made his debut as Romeo in Birmingham in 1810. William Macready's grandson, Nevil Macready, a soldier, went on to command the British army in Ireland during the Irish War of Independence and until the withdrawal of British administration and the creation of the Irish Free State in the early 1920s.

## **The Europeans**

### **Sir Rupert Kettle**

An earlier wave of migration was represented by Sir Rupert Kettle of Merridale, Wolverhampton, a county court judge, who was knighted in 1880 for his pioneering role in establishing a system of industrial arbitration to settle strikes. His surname concealed his descent from Henri Quitel, a French Huguenot who had emigrated to Birmingham on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), and became established in business as a glass-stainer.

### **John William Fletcher**

Another migrant who anglicised his name was John William Fletcher, vicar of Madeley in Shropshire from 1760. He had been born Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère, in Switzerland, where he encountered a strict reformed protestant orthodoxy which seems to have deterred him from entering the church there. Instead, he came to England and was converted to Methodism, of which he became a saintly exemplar. He shared his ministry with his wife Mary, a member of the Huguenot Bosanquet family, who survived her husband and continued to preach five times a week in Madeley's tithe barn until her death.

## **The 'Pull' of Religious Vocation**

### **Thomas Falkner**

The West Midlands were also the residence, in his final years, of the Manchester-born missionary Thomas Falkner, who went to South America in 1730 as a

surgeon on a slave ship, converted to Catholicism, and spent over thirty-five years as a Jesuit missionary, working mainly in Patagonia. After the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spanish America in 1767, he became chaplain to Catholic families in Worcestershire, Herefordshire, and finally Plowden Hall, Shropshire, where he was buried.

### **Jeremiah Libupuo Moshueshue**

The churchyard of the Shropshire village of Welshampton was the burial place of Jeremiah Libupuo Moshueshue, third son of Moshesh, chief of Basutoland in South Africa. He had been nominated to study at the missionary college of St Augustine's, Canterbury, and was visiting the vicar of Welshampton when he died of fever there in August 1863.

### **Shapurji Edalji**

Also a student of St Augustine's, Shapurji Edalji, the Bombay-born son of a Parsee merchant, settled in the West Midlands, but with unhappy consequences. Appointed vicar of Great Wyrley, Staffordshire, in 1876, Edalji became involved in a long battle against an injustice which had racial undercurrents when, in 1903, his son George Edalji, was tried and implausibly convicted and imprisoned for maiming livestock in the parish. A free - but grudging - pardon was eventually granted in 1907.

### **Peter Stanford**

Another campaigner against racial injustice was commemorated in 2011 when a Birmingham Civic Society blue plaque was placed on Highgate Baptist chapel. From 1889 to 1895 Peter Stanford, who had been born a slave in Hampton, Virginia, USA, was minister there. During his Birmingham ministry Stanford was a leading figure in the campaign against the lynchings of African Americans in the USA and returned there to investigate and publish an account of those horrors.

## **The 'Push' of Persecution**

Refugees escaping racial persecution in Nazi Germany were among those who settled in the West Midlands in the 1930s.

### **Nikolaus Pevsner**

Some gained positions at the University of Birmingham, notably the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner. Born in Leipzig, Pevsner was a Lutheran convert but of Jewish descent, and was forced out of his lectureship in Germany by the Nazi race laws. He came to Birmingham in 1934 as a Fellow in the Department of Commerce, where he undertook studies in industrial design.

### **Rudolf Peierls and Otto Frisch**

Few research findings can have been as historically momentous as those set out by two émigré physicists

Anna Essinger, founder of a school for Jewish children fleeing Germany after 1938. Photograph from *Kritisches Denken und praktische Arbeit – die pädagogische Arche von Anna Essinger in England*, undated.



Courtesy the Leo Baeck Institute, New York



Polish families outside the Church at Prees Heath internment camp, Shropshire.

at the University of Birmingham in March 1940. Rudolf Peierls was a Berliner, but like Pevsner a Lutheran of Jewish descent, who left Germany in 1933 and was appointed to a chair of applied mathematics at Birmingham in 1937. Otto Frisch was an Austrian of Jewish descent though a baptised Protestant, who had been dismissed from his chair in Hamburg in 1933 and was visiting Birmingham in the summer of 1939 when the outbreak of war prevented his return to Copenhagen. Working together on the implications of nuclear fission, Frisch and Peierls concluded that a relatively small critical mass of the pure uranium isotope could produce a 'super bomb' and that this was capable of being delivered by airborne attack. As physicists around the world were known to be investigating this possibility, it was urgent that the Allies should develop the weapon before the Nazis did so.

The associations of Pevsner, Peierls, and Frisch with the University of Birmingham are commemorated by blue plaques on the Birmingham campus.

Some refugees from Nazism found themselves interned in rural Shropshire in the summer of 1940, following the fall of the Low Countries and France to the German forces. The fear that a 'fifth column' of enemy aliens might weaken Britain's own defences led to the panic measure of a round-up of so-called enemy aliens (though of course most had ample reason to seek the defeat of Nazi Germany).

A former First World War training camp at Prees Heath near Whitchurch in Shropshire was hastily requisitioned and many refugees were interned in rudimentary conditions, under canvas.

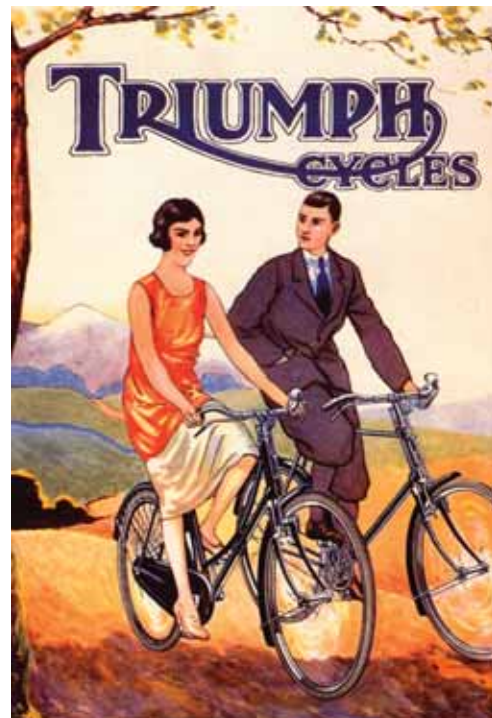
### **Norbert Brainin**

Among the internees was a Viennese Jewish orphan Norbert Brainin, a violinist who had fled to Britain after the annexation of Austria in 1938. At Prees Heath he met another Austrian violinist of Jewish descent, Peter Schidlof, and they went on to become members of the post-war Amadeus Quartet.

### **Ernst Schumacher**

Also among the internees was the German economist Ernst Schumacher, later author of the international bestseller *Small is Beautiful*. He had moved to Britain in 1936 when he refused to conform to the Nazi regime, and spent the summer of 1940 in the camp.

The phenomenon of indiscriminate internment, and the tented camps such as those at Prees Heath and Sutton Coldfield, was exposed in a Penguin Special paperback rushed out in 1940 by François Lafitte, a member of the social science research body Political and Economic Planning and later professor of Social Policy at the University of Birmingham.



1920s magazine advertisement for Triumph bicycles, founded by Siegfried Bettmann and Maurice Schulte.

© The Advertising Archives

### **Anna Essinger**

Shropshire, though, offered a refuge for the school run by the émigré German progressive educationist Anna Essinger. Her school, whose pupils included unaccompanied Jewish children fleeing from Germany after 1938, was moved in 1940 from Kent to Trench Hall, near Wem in Shropshire, where it remained until 1946.

## **The Growth of Industry**

From the earliest days of car manufacture in the Midlands, migrants played a key part in the industry.

### **Siegfried Bettmann and Maurice Schulte**

One of the first was the Bavarian businessman Siegfried Bettmann who with his partner Maurice Schulte, also from Nuremberg, founded the Triumph firm in Coventry in 1886, initially manufacturing bicycles and moving into motorcycles from 1902. Bettmann was naturalised a British subject in 1895 and became Mayor of Coventry in 1913.

### **Louis Coatalen**

A young French engineer Louis Coatalen, who in 1900 joined the Crowden Motor Car Company at Leamington Spa, became chief engineer for Humber at Coventry. In 1909, he became the inspirational chief engineer of the Sunbeam company at Wolverhampton, for whom he designed a series of record-breaking cars which established the firm's international reputation through its racing successes in the 1920s.

Statue of Randolph Turpin in the centre of Warwick. Sculpted by Carl Payne and unveiled in 2001.



21 Oldham girls crowd into a Mini in 1966. The small car was designed in the Midlands by Alec Issigonis.

### Sir Alec Issigonis

In terms of continuing legacy, Sir Alec Issigonis, born in the Ottoman Empire in 1906 of mixed Greek and German parentage, is perhaps unparalleled. Evacuated with his family from his home town of Smyrna, in 1922, when Turkish forces swept into the Greek-held city, he made a new life in England, studying engineering, and joining Morris Motors in Oxford, where he designed the Morris Minor which was launched in 1948. His move to Birmingham in 1955, as head of a design team to produce a small fuel-efficient car for the British Motor Corporation, resulted in the Mini, launched in 1959. Gillian Bardsley of the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon has commented that the Mini 'was probably the last great product of one man's vision the car industry is likely to see'.

Car production in the West Midlands created employment opportunities, and coincided with post-war migration from the Commonwealth countries of Asia and the West Indies.

### The First Asian City Councillor

#### Dr Dhani Prem

A leading figure on welfare bodies representing Commonwealth immigrants in the West Midlands, and a frequent participant in the national debates on immigration policy in the 1960s and 1970s, was the Birmingham medical practitioner Dr Dhani Prem. Born in India, he had come to Britain on the eve of the Second World War, and settled in Birmingham, where he became the first Asian city councillor in 1948, representing Great Barr. He stood as a Liberal candidate for Coventry South-East at the general election of February 1974, when he told a newspaper: 'It would be good psychologically for both the immigrants and the British to have an immigrant MP'.

### Success through Sport

#### Randolph Turpin

A bronze statue erected in Warwick in 2001 commemorates another pioneer, Randolph Turpin, who in 1950 won the British middleweight boxing title in a sport which had until the 1940s operated a colour bar. Turpin's father was from British Guiana and had come to Britain in the First World War, but died shortly after his son's birth in Leamington Spa. Turpin was brought up in Warwick, and trained in a gym there, sensationally taking the world middleweight title from Sugar Ray Robinson in London in July 1951. Although he lost the world title in a rematch in New York two months later, Turpin went on to win British and Empire light heavyweight titles in 1952. His last top-level fight was in Birmingham in 1958.



Courtesy Visit Warwick

#### Laurie Cunningham, Cyrille Regis and Brendon Batson

Three Black professional sportsmen, all born after Turpin's world title heroics, jointly made a breakthrough in West Midlands football when they were signed by West Bromwich Albion within a year: first, in March 1977, Laurie

Cunningham (born in North London in 1956), then Cyrille Regis in May 1977 (born in Guiana in 1958), and finally Brendon Batson (born in Grenada in 1953) signed in February 1978.

They played in the successful Albion team which reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA Cup in March 1979.

### Commemoration of Lives

Since its creation in the 1880s, the *Dictionary of National Biography* has had a rule against including any living person, so it is often decades before sportspeople, whose peak achievements often take place in their twenties, are included; and by the same token, there is a delay before social change can be represented. Laurie Cunningham died tragically young in a car accident in July 1989 in Madrid, where he had been signed a decade earlier by Real Madrid. He now has an entry in the *Oxford DNB* which records how, the son of parents from the West Indies, and in the month after joining Albion, he became the first Black player to represent England. A statue, to be titled 'The Celebration' and marking the achievement of the trio in inspiring a generation of Black footballers in Britain, is planned to be unveiled as the centrepiece of a new development in West Bromwich in July 2014, on the anniversary of Cunningham's death. It will offer another insight into the experience of migration, which Ford Madox Brown's painting explored more than 150 years ago. ●

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#### Further Reading

For articles about people highlighted in this piece see the *Oxford DNB* which is freely available online at [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com) using your public library ticket.

Connie Wan, *Samuel Lines and sons: rediscovering Birmingham's artistic dynasty 1794 - 1898 through works on paper at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists*. [unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012] [www.etheses.bham.ac.uk](http://www.etheses.bham.ac.uk)

#### Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The *Oxford DNB* is a collection of essays on more than 58,800 noteworthy figures who shaped British history. It is freely available online using your public library ticket. Go to [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com) and follow Library Card Login.

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