

Running from Albion: Migration to Cuba from the British Isles in the 19th Century

Abstract

Migrants from the British Isles played a hitherto little recognised part in the development of Cuban society and economy in the nineteenth century. Although not a numerically large migration, British and Irish merchants, professionals and, above all, workers had a significance for Cuba out of proportion to the numbers involved. However, there is little evidence of a “British” community existing, and the “British” identity of the migrants was at best ambiguous. The article points towards an understanding of their insertion into, and their significance within Cuban society based not on a straightforward national identity, but rather the complex interaction of this with the other axes along which that society was divided.

‘I am not surprised that great numbers . . . are anxious to emigrate,’ commented James Bright, MP, to the Glasgow Council of Trades in 1858. ‘If I were younger, and in their position, I should strain every nerve to enable me to find a home in the United States, or in one of the British colonies.’¹ In the forty years preceding his statement, at least 5 million British and Irish did just that, leaving home and family to make the difficult and dangerous sea journey across the Atlantic to the Americas, or even further to the new colonies in the Antipodes.² In the decade that he was speaking, this migration reached a peak, with more than 1.7 million leaving the British Isles to begin lives elsewhere.³ By far the largest part of this migration was bound for the United States, increasingly seen by many as a land of opportunity and relatively easy to reach, in particular with the opening up of the regular steam package routes in the middle years of the century.⁴ A somewhat smaller, though still significant, number travelled to British North America, Australia and New Zealand. In fact, no more than three percent of the total figure migrated to other destinations.⁵

¹ *The Engineer*, vol.6, no.143 (24 Sept. 1858)

² *The Engineer*, vol.6, no.147 (22 Oct. 1858)

³ Charlotte Erickson (ed), *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1914 - select documents* (London, 1976), p.27

⁴ The first transatlantic service began in 1838, cutting the journey time between Britain and North America from an average of 34 days, to just 17. However, the ships weren’t really entirely successful or efficient, nor had steam firmly established its dominance over sail, until the first iron steamships began the transatlantic run in 1850 (Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Innovation and Urban Order* (London, 1998), pp.361-4). A steam mail packet service ran from Britain to Cuba from the early-1840s.

⁵ William E Van Vugt, ‘British emigration during the early 1850s, with special reference to emigration to the USA’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of London, 1986, p.14

Although dwarfed by the mass, nation-building migrations to North America and Australia, these other destinations saw the establishment of British and Irish migrants in far-flung parts of the world. In some places this took the form of English-speaking communities, holding a distinct identity to that of the surrounding society into which they became slowly integrated. Such was the case of the Irish and Welsh communities in Argentina.⁶ In other places, where no such clearly defined community of British origin existed, British and Irish migrants still arrived and settled: at times permanently, establishing families; at other times eventually moving on, either to return from whence they came, or to seek out more permanent and sympathetic sites for their settlement. They migrated for a variety of reasons. Amongst them there could be found the younger sons of the landed gentry, seeking out the land, fortune and adventure that primogeniture traditions denied them at home. Others were merchants, opening up commercial routes, becoming wealthy from the produce of the countries they settled, and making full use of the advantages that their nationality provided them with: privileged access to the coffers of British capital. Most, however, were workers. Some of these fleeing poverty, unemployment and repression; others seeking out employment opportunities in which their skills as industrial workers could be sold at a premium, enabling them to aspire for a standard of living that far exceeded their expectations in the British Isles.⁷ But whatever their class background, most were probably fleeing, in one way or another, the drabness and tensions of industrial Britain, and looking towards a dreamed-of paradise which, however ephemeral the dream might have been, drew them towards their exotic new homes.

During the 19th Century many people arrived in Cuba from many parts of the planet. Amongst them there were British and Irish⁸ migrants, who, although few in number, played a disproportionately large part in the affairs of the island during this period. They were

⁶ On the Irish in Argentina, Patrick MacKenna, 'The Formation of Hiberno-Argentine Society', in Oliver Marshall (ed), *English Speaking Communities in Latin America* (London, 2000); on the Welsh, Glyn Williams, 'Neither British nor Argentinian: the Welsh in Patagonia', in Hennesy & King (eds), *The Land that England Lost* (London, 1991)

⁷ Magnus Mörner, *Adventurers and Proletarians: the story of migrants in Latin America* (Pittsburgh & Paris, 1985). For general a general account of various aspects British migration in the nineteenth century, see Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England: Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca & London, 1994)

⁸ Throughout the nineteenth-century it is often hard to clearly distinguish British and Irish migrants, since officially they were considered to have the same nationality. It is for this reason that this study groups together all migrants from the British Isles, only distinguishing the British from the Irish where this is possible or relevant. In most cases, they will be generically referred to as the "British", the apostrophes indicating the questionable nature of the label. The situation was further complicated by the presence of "British" whose origins were, in fact, the British West Indies.

concentrated in parts of the country that were of greatest significance to the Cuban economy of the era; and were also engaged in occupations that were crucial to the development of Cuba. British and Irish merchants had an important role in Cuba's international maritime trade, and also in the introduction of machinery, railways and other innovations. British and Irish professionals were prominent in areas that were previously all but ignored in the island – medicine, teaching and engineering. British and Irish planters escaped the abolition of slavery in the British Antilles to establish themselves with their slaves in the Cuban countryside. But the migration from the British Isles was above all working class. Although this also included labourers, domestic servants and sailors, the majority arriving in Cuba were artisans, or skilled workers: in particular machinists coming to install, operate and maintain the steam engines that were being introduced into the sugar mills, mines and railways. Nor were they just men. A substantial proportion of the migrants were women, and those from the British Isles showed greater propensity to active involvement beyond the confines of the home than other white women in Cuba at this time.

Although at an official level all these migrants were categorised as “British”, in fact there is little evidence that they formed a distinct community, defined in terms of nationality. To be “British” was, rather, a label of convenience – either for profit, or to escape from difficult circumstances. In circumstances where it might be advantageous, even migrants who had no legitimate claim to the title would claim British subject-hood; and in the course of everyday life, even those who were British born and bred were likely not to overtly assert their Britishness. Not only did the migrants themselves have an apparently ambivalent attitude to their national identity, but so too did the authorities, both Spanish and British. In seeking to understand the significance of this migration to Cuban history and society, it may be more useful to be looking towards the interaction of national identity, such as there was, with the other categories of social division (class, race and gender) that defined Cuban society in this period.

Nineteenth Century migration to Cuba

The Cuban nation was not formed simply out of the combination of free migration from Spain, and enforced migration from Africa, although these did provide the most important ethnic

groupings in the nation's make up. Individuals from many other countries also travelled to, and settled in, Cuba. Some of these migrant groups were large in number, and their influence upon Cuban society is still immediately apparent, as was the case of the Chinese, thousands of whom entered in the second half of the nineteenth century as bonded labourers to fill the gap left on the plantations by the collapse of slavery.⁹ But other national groups also played their part, even if they have remained somewhat less visible: French, Latin Americans and North Americans, and following these in numerical order, the "British".¹⁰

Although Juan Pérez de la Riva estimated that a total of as many as 20,000 "British" were resident in Cuba in the course of the nineteenth century,¹¹ census figures suggest that at any one time their presence in the island was considerably smaller. While it isn't clear how many migrants originating in the British Isles were living in Cuba at the beginning of the century, it is likely that there were very few. Some names are known, mostly of merchants – such as James Drake, who settled in Havana sometime in the 1790s, establishing a trading house and marrying into a very respectable local family, the del Castillos.¹² However, the first big wave of immigration began around 1818. Partly as a reaction to the Treaty for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, signed by Spain and Britain in 1817, but also as a result of the growing concerns amongst elite white Creoles about the increasing black presence in the island's population: projects aimed at white colonisation began to be promoted.¹³ While most attention was, naturally, given to bringing in colonists from Spain and the Canary Islands, a certain number were also arriving from other countries, especially France, Britain and North America. According to the reports made to the Sociedad Económica, 251 British and Irish¹⁴ adult male migrants entered Havana and Matanzas during 1818 and 1819, representing around one in seven of the total number.¹⁵ There were almost certainly many more not included in these

⁹ Duvon Clough Corbitt, *A Study of the Chinese in Cuba, 1847-1947* (Wilmore, Ky, 1971)

¹⁰ Armildez de Toledo, *Noticias Estadísticas de la Isla de Cuba en 1862* (Havana, 1864)

¹¹ Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Los demógrafos de la dependencias* (Havana, 1979), p.21, note 35

¹² See Roland T Ely, *Comerciantes cubanos del siglo XIX* (Havana, 1961)

¹³ Extended contemporary debates around this theme can be found in the *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* throughout this period; see also Tomás Romay, *Obras Completas, Tomo II: Trabajos políticos, literarios y otros*, compiled by José López Sánchez (Havana, 1966); and Consuelo Naranjo Orovio & Armando García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba en el Siglo XIX* (Aranjuez, Spain, 1996)

¹⁴ 93 British, 158 Irish. This is one of the few occasions in which British and Irish migrants can be distinguished from one another in nineteenth-century Cuba.

¹⁵ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, 1819 and 1820. The figures for the four principal nationalities represented breaks down as follows: Spanish 35.4%, French 29.5%, British/Irish 13.7%, North American 9.6%.

figures: women and children accompanying the listed men; and those arriving either at other cities (Santiago de Cuba or Cienfuegos, for example); or directly to the new colonies being established around Nuevitas and Caibarién in the centre of the island, or Guantánamo in the East. Many were undoubtedly attracted by the generous provisions offered to them. For example, those going to Nuevitas could expect to receive:

...one *caballería* of land or thirty two acres in absolute dominion and property, with the precise condition that they start to prepare and cultivate the land in the first six months... and to have it open and at least the half of it made use of in the following two years...¹⁶

They were also initially provided with necessary tools and provisions, although many no doubt suffered great hardship due to the climate and the poor quality of much of the land.

Although the coming two decades saw others arrive and establish themselves, this seems to have been largely off set by the numbers leaving (or dying). By the beginning of the 1840s, there were still just 327 “British” residents in Cuba.¹⁷ If the census figures are to be trusted, it would appear that it was in this decade that a new wave of immigration began to occur. By the census of 1847, the number of residents originating in the British Isles had almost doubled to 605,¹⁸ and had doubled yet again by 1862, when some 1,244 were recorded as living in the island.¹⁹ It isn’t clear whether this was the high point of the “British” presence. The next census was not held until during the United States occupation, in 1899, following the end of the War of Independence. At this time, there were just 666 recorded as living in Cuba.²⁰ When the rest left, or stopped to arrive, is uncertain, though first the Ten Years War (1868-78), followed by the *Guerra Chiquita* (1879-80) and the subsequent political instability, leading to the outbreak of the decisive war in 1895, must have had a strong effect on the numbers willing to settle in the island.

Geographical distribution of British and Irish migrants in Cuba

¹⁶ Romay, *Obras Completas*, p.155 (Present author’s translation)

¹⁷ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, 1844. It isn’t clear how accurate this census was, nor how their calculations were made, and may well have been limited to a count of established households, thus failing to count such migrants as the Irish navvies, living on camps and working on the railroads; or many of the women and children living with male heads of household.

¹⁸ *Cuadro Estadístico de la siempre fiel Isla de Cuba*, 1847

¹⁹ De Toledo, *Noticias Estadísticas*

²⁰ US War Department, *Informe sobre el Censo de Cuba*, 1899

“British” migrants were by no means uniformly distributed about the island. Figure 1 shows their distribution by province from the three censuses in which such details are provided.

Insert Table 1 here

That there was a larger community of “British” migrants in Havana than elsewhere should not be surprising. Havana was not just the political capital of the island, but also the most important commercial centre and the principal port of entry into Cuba, especially from Europe and North America. Even if they subsequently travelled to other parts of the island, the first sight that most migrants and other travellers would have had of Cuba would have been of the Havana coastline, the Morro Castle, and the Bay, with its natural harbour teeming with ships of all nationalities. Not only would the migrant population of Havana have been made up of those who had newly arrived, or who had established themselves in the buoyant economy of the capital; others, who had previously been working elsewhere in Cuba, would succumb to the gravitational pull of Havana either when their employment had ended, or because they could no longer stand the conditions they were working under and were looking for new opportunities, or for a ship out. As a result of this, Havana consistently claimed almost half of the total “British” presence in the island throughout the period for which figures are available.

The reason behind the fluctuations in the migrant population of Matanzas can be more closely defined. The rapid rise in a “British” presence in this province can be traced, probably almost exclusively, to the expansion of the sugar industry in the middle years of the century. Most of this occurred in this province, and many of the technological innovations in the industry, which brought many migrants from the British Isles in the first place, were being made here. The cities of Matanzas and Cárdenas, till then boasting small populations, rapidly grew, and by 1862 Matanzas province had the largest non-Spanish resident population in the island.²¹ That much of the immigration into Cuba from the British Isles was linked directly to the sugar industry is also reflected in the increase seen in the number of migrants in Las Villas province, which gradually increased in importance as the sugar frontier pushed inexorably eastwards.

²¹ Around 18,000 non-Spanish residents were recorded as living in Matanzas province, compared to 13,000 in Havana. See Toledo 1864. On the development of Matanzas province, see the study of the province made by Laird W Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: the social and economic history of monoculture in Matanzas* (Princeton, NJ, 1990)

This connection to sugar is further confirmed if we look at the figures for individual jurisdictions. These reveal the rapid growth of a sizeable “British” presence in the leading sugar producing districts. Their presence in the environs of the city of Matanzas grew from just 33 in 1847, to 117 by 1862; likewise in Cárdenas, with an increase from 70 to 195 in the same period. The extension of the sugar zone southwards is reflected in the growth of a “British” community near Cienfuegos (58 living there in 1862, where there had not been any in 1847); and eastward with the arrival by 1862 of 73 “British” migrants in Colon, and the growth of the community in Sagua la Grande (the principal sugar growing district of Las Villas) from seven to 42.²²

The story in Oriente is somewhat different. That the “British” population there did not share in the fluctuations being experienced elsewhere, but in fact remained remarkably constant in number, suggests that this province was in many ways distinct from the rest of the island. Although there were sugar plantations in this area, it wouldn’t be until the beginning of the twentieth century that the eastwards expansion of sugar, and the advancements in the sugar industry, would fully reach Oriente. During the nineteenth century the region remained caught in its long history of being the economic backwater of Cuba – and it was not without cause that it would be this province that provided the focus for the two wars of independence. However, despite its general backwardness, there were important centres of economic growth: in particular Santiago de Cuba, where most of the “British” migrants in the province were concentrated. Many of these played a prominent role not just in the commerce of sugar and coffee from the local plantations, but also the exploitation of the substantial copper reserves to be found in the region.²³

Merchants, landowners and professionals

The most prominent “British” migrants in Cuba were merchants – many of whom exploited their foreign connections in order to provide a channel through which the sugar, coffee, copper and other Cuban products could be sold on the international market, and at the same time bring into the island foreign capital, and a variety of manufactures. Many of the railroads in the

²² *Cuadro Estadístico*, 1847; De Toledo, *Noticias Estadísticas*

²³ See Olga Portuondo Zúñiga, *Santiago de Cuba: desde su fundación hasta la Guerra de los Diez Años* (Santiago de Cuba, 1996)

island were constructed with the British funds that were partly secured through their intervention with merchant bankers in London such as Baring Brothers or Frederick Huth.²⁴ They also helped to provide a link with the engineering companies of Clydeside and Merseyside, that were producing steam-driven machinery for use on the sugar plantations, and which helped to revolutionise production in Cuba during the middle years of the century. Some of these merchants came to be very prominent within Cuban society. Most notable were the Drakes, with Drake Brothers²⁵ becoming one of the most important commercial houses in Havana and Matanzas; and likewise the Brooks, in Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo at the other end of the island.

However, if we look at the available figures for individuals resident in Cuba at various times, they show that the prominence held by these merchants of British origin had very little relationship to their numbers. As Figure 2 shows, although as the century progressed they represented an increasingly higher proportion of the total number of “British” residents in Cuba, they were very few in number. This numerical insignificance becomes even more striking when compared to the total number of merchants. Detailed figures are only available for this from the 1899 Census, but this shows that the 67 “British” with that occupation, were tiny proportion of the total of 47,404 merchants present in Cuba in that year (most of whom were foreign born).²⁶ It can be supposed that such a picture held true throughout the century.

Insert Table 2 here

Nevertheless, the few “British” merchants that were present were considerably more visible than their numbers would suggest. In 1848, the British Consul General in Havana, Joseph Crawford, sent back a report to the Foreign Office of the numbers of British-owned mercantile houses in Havana in 1842 and 1848. The two lists show just 13 in existence – with slight differences between the two years due to a constant shifting of partnerships, and the highly speculative nature of much business (and particularly foreign involvement in that business) in

²⁴ See Oscar Zanetti & Alejandro García, *Sugar and railroads: a Cuban history, 1837 – 1959* (Chapel Hill, 1998)

²⁵ Otherwise Drake Hermanos, depending on context.

²⁶ US War Dept, *Informe sobre el censo*. Most of these merchants (which included small shop keepers, alongside partners of large commercial houses) were of Spanish origin, though also with growing numbers of other nationalities, in particular North Americans. Disproportionately few were of Cuban birth, reflecting their effective exclusion from much commercial activity by the Spanish during the nineteenth century.

Cuba at this time. However, if the names are compared with those that appear repeatedly in contemporary newspapers in association with the consignment of ships for both export and import, it can be seen just how important these British-born merchants were.²⁷ Front pages were daily dominated with shipments coming in or leaving Havana, attached to the names of Drake Brothers, DeConinck, J C Tennant or Villoldo Wardrop. There were also advertisements from these same firms, proclaiming the sale of many of the imported goods:

UTENSILS FOR SUGAR MILLS

In the house of Messrs Drake & Coit can be found on sale at very equitable prices the following:- pans, evaporators, drums, shafts, half shafts, crowns, fornalla mouths, dice, tops, ball bearings, ingots and all else necessary for the elaboration of sugar. Said effects as well as being in fine shape are from the best factories of England.²⁸

With time, some of the wealthiest merchants began to move into landowning. In the case of the Drake family, this was partly facilitated by their close alliance with the foremost of Cuban aristocratic families, the del Castillos. They came to be at the forefront of the extension of sugar cultivation beyond Matanzas into the central region of the island. James Drake and his sons were amongst the first pioneers of the unused lands around the River Sagua, and were responsible for the opening of the river's first steamboat service.²⁹ With so much virgin land available, they were able to project things on a grand scale. Commenting to a business associate about a new estate at Sagua la Grande, Drake boasted that 'everything on it is planned on a large scale and if no misfortune happens, I think it will in two or three years be the largest estate in the island'.³⁰ Others came into possession of estates through their ownership of the mortgages, to which planters had to increasingly resort in order to be able to afford the expensive new steam machinery they needed to install to remain competitive. The British merchant house, Storey, Spalding & Co of Havana, helped obtain mortgages for Cuban plantations from Baring Brothers in London. This led them to have effective administrative

²⁷ Despatch from Joseph Crawford to Viscount Palmerston, Havana, 31 Dec. 1848 (PRO, FO 72/748)

²⁸ *La Aurora de Matanzas*, 21 May 1834 (Present author's translation)

²⁹ Letters from James Drake to Henry Coit (Havana, 20 Nov. 1841 and 28 Feb. 1842), Museo de la Ciudad, Havana (MC), Fondo Moreno Fraginats (MF), Box 234, Legajo 1, #20 and Legajo 3, #1

³⁰ Letter of James Drake to Henry Coit (Havana, 17 April 1841), MC, MF, Box 234, Legajo 1, #2.

control of a number of estates, which increasingly could not take a step without consulting with them. When payments were defaulted on in times of difficulty, they would often take direct control, on behalf of Barings.³¹

However, there was another group of “British” landowners in Cuba, with a rather more shadowy presence. In the 1820s and 30s, as the British West Indies moved towards slave emancipation, a number of “British” planters shifted their interests into Cuba. Most of these came from the Bahamas, and they brought with them their slaves. In the Candelaria area between Gibara and Holguin they continued their sugar and coffee growing ventures with a captive labour force they would have lost had they remained on the British colony. Their presence only came to light in the late 1830s and early 1840s, as successive British representatives in Cuba (and in particular the abolitionists R R Madden and David Turnbull) discovered the presence in this region of large numbers of black British subjects illegally held in slavery. When James Thomson managed to escape his masters, and eventually reached Jamaica, he provided an eyewitness account of what was occurring. ‘During this period I saw great numbers of English people, and in that whole neighbourhood nothing else is spoken but English.’ He provided a list of eleven estates in the Candelaria district where this was going on. Some were very large, as was ‘Sam Clarke’s place on the river Gibara, sugar & coffee estate, with about 500 negroes, more than half from the Bahamas’. Another was owned by a Revd. Drick, formerly Church of England minister at Nassau.³² The far from exhaustive investigation made by David Turnbull revealed definite proof of the presence of 28 “British” landowners guilty of having brought people from neighbouring islands into slavery in Cuba.³³ In the end, Turnbull was prevented from pursuing his enquiries.

“British” immigrants were not just prominent in commerce and planting: although again few in number, the professionals amongst them had a special importance in nineteenth century Cuban society. This was especially true of the doctors and dentists. Judging by surnames, a substantial number of medics listed in the Guide to Foreigners were British or Anglo-American

³¹ Correspondence of Storey, Spalding & Co to Baring Brothers (1850-52), Barings Archive, HC4.6.10

³² Statement of James Thomson, made before Max. Aug. Baron v. Ketelhodt, 22 March 1844, in PRO, Colonial Office (CO), 137/279, Despatch no. 69 from Lord Elgin to Lord Stanley, 1 May 1844

³³ PRO, CO 318/157, David Turnbull to Lord Stanley, Nassau, 17 Sept. 1842

in origin.³⁴ Many of the newly arrived practitioners took out adverts in the local newspapers, as did George Augustus Dijk:

Doctor in medicine from the University of Edinburgh, Honorary Member of the Physicians Society of Guy's, and member of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, ... desirous of being useful to the inhabitants of Havana, has obtained from the superior council his incorporation into the body of professors of curative science in this capital: for which reason he announces to all those who need his assistance, informing them that he lives for now in the street of Teniente Rey, no.76, opposite the silversmith Rozan.³⁵

In fact, possibly the most famous of nineteenth century Cuban doctors was of British descent. Carlos Finlay (who discovered that yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitoes, and therefore paved the way for a cure for what was an annual scourge on the local population – and particularly on recent arrivals) was the son of Dr Edward Finlay, a Scottish surgeon who migrated to Cuba early in the nineteenth century.³⁶

Working class migrants

Despite the prominence of such middle class individuals, the migration to Cuba from the British Isles was in actual fact very different in character to that suggested by the weight of documentary evidence left by the merchants, landowners and professionals. By far the greatest number of “British” migrants were working class. Of those who arrived in Havana and Matanzas during 1818 and 1819, as part of the promotion of white colonisation, 95% were workers. Of these, though there were a handful of sailors and some 74 agricultural labourers, the great majority (162) practiced some form of artisan trade: mostly carpenters, and others engaged in industries related to construction and industry, rather than domestic and luxury manufactures.³⁷ Although some of these individuals initially found themselves in some difficulties on their arrival, and had to have recourse to the three *reales* a day that were offered

³⁴ *Guía de forasteros de las siempre fiel isla de Cuba*, 1839 and 1840

³⁵ *Diario de la Habana*, 26 Sept. 1837 (Present author's translation)

³⁶ Francisco Xavier de Santa Cruz y Mallen, *Historia de Familias Cubanas*, Tomo V, p.189, note 1

³⁷ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, 1819 & 1820. This compares strikingly with French migrants, who were more likely to be craft artisans, such as cabinetmakers and watchmakers.

in welfare to those who had problems supporting themselves,³⁸ most readily found employment in the burgeoning sugar and coffee plantations, that were increasingly hungry for foreign skilled workers to make up for the lack of such workers in Cuba. By the 1840s, some of these had succeeded in doing quite well for themselves. Joseph Leaming, a mason from Leeds, arrived in Cuba in 1819. By 1844 – when he was arrested for complicity in the Escalera conspiracy, and subsequently died – he had become the manager of the Retiro coffee plantation in Limonar, near Matanzas.³⁹ Theodore Phinney, who originally arrived in Cuba as a carpenter, had later progressed to become the owner in his own right of several sugar and coffee plantations.⁴⁰

If the earlier migration was partially prompted by a need for skilled foreign workers in an island starved of native workers with the appropriate skills and experience, this could only intensify as sugar production developed during the middle years of the nineteenth century. In 1835, work began on the first railway in Cuba, between Havana and Güines.⁴¹ The chronic labour shortage had to be partly met with the importation of foreign labourers, many described as Irish. Although they had been brought to Cuba by Benjamin Wright, the North American principal civil engineer overseeing the project, no guarantee was provided to give them passage home, and many found themselves left, when their contract ended, begging in the streets. The conditions that they were expected to work under were very poor. Their employers, used to the labour regime of a slave society, felt no compunction in whipping them for supposed misdemeanours – not infrequently connected with drunkenness. This was not just true of those who were working on the Havana-Güines line, but also on the various subsequent railway construction projects. In 1859, John Powers – an Irish labourer on the railway line at Ceiba Mocha – ‘died of the unheard of Barbarities inflicted upon him whilst he was confined in “the stocks”’.⁴²

³⁸ Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento, Legajo 191, #8566

³⁹ Despatch from Joseph Crawford to Lord Aberdeen, 9 Oct. 1844 (PRO, FO 72/664)

⁴⁰ Barings Archive, HC4.6.2 (Part 2), #210

⁴¹ Zanetti & Garcia, *Sugar and Railroads*, demonstrates the close relationship between the developing sugar industry, and the construction of railways.

⁴² Letter from Joseph T Crawford to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 26 March 1859 (PRO, FO 313/54)

In 1840, the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País commented that 'every mill, every steam ship, every locomotive on the railway has to have beside it an intelligent foreigner who directs and inspects the machine'.⁴³ As a result of this, from the 1830s large quantities of foreign machinists travelled to Cuba, almost guaranteed employment in the island. Although there were also North Americans and French, a significant number of them were from the British Isles, reflecting the importance of British engineering companies (such as Mirlees Watson of Glasgow, or Fawcett Preston of Liverpool) in the provision of sugar milling equipment, and steam engines. In a survey of foreign mechanics in Matanzas in 1852, 14 of the 41 were "British" (nine from Scotland, four English and one Irish).⁴⁴ In fact, machinists represented by far the largest single occupational group applying for domicile in Cuba during the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1843 and 1847, some 159 "British" migrants sought to make themselves permanently resident in Cuba. Of these, 72 described their occupation as *maquinista* (machinist).⁴⁵ Although there were other trades represented (carpenters, miners, blacksmiths, masons, iron workers and so on), it was the machinist on the sugar plantation that characterised "British" labour migration to Cuba in these years.

Most of the foreign skilled workers, and in particular the machinists, found themselves living in conditions that were, at least economically, very different to those that the railway labourers had to face. The latter received an average wage of just nine pesos a month. This compares with the normal wage of a native white worker of between 15 and 20 pesos.⁴⁶ The skilled workers bound for the plantations were much more fortunate. They could expect to be provided with a small house on the estate, and possibly a couple of slaves to look after their personal needs.⁴⁷ Even on plantations where other skilled workers were well paid, the machinist was in a completely different league. On the Palma estate near Sagua la Grande, owned by the Anglo-American planter (and for a time co-owned by the aforementioned Theodore Phinney), the machinist was paid a monthly salary of \$136 (plus full board and lodgings). This compares to the maximum monthly income of \$60 earned by the carpenters.

⁴³ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, Tomo IX (1840), p.240 (Present author's translation)

⁴⁴ Archivo Histórico Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Gobierno Provincial, Ingenios, Legajo 6, #90, quoted in Bergad 1990, p.122

⁴⁵ ANC, Miscelánea de Libros, #11910. The British and Irish came third, after the French (total 298), and the North Americans (265)

⁴⁶ Manuel Moreno Friginals, *El Ingenio*, Havana, 1978, Tomo I, p.300

⁴⁷ Moreno Friginals, 1978, Tomo I, p.306

Not surprisingly, many of the machinists were able to save considerable amounts of money, and it was common for them to spend the summer months in the United States, following the grinding season, where they would go 'to have a good time'.⁴⁸

"British" women migrants

As was the case with most migrant groups, not just in Cuba but elsewhere, the majority of "British" migrants were male. However, a significant number of them were women. The census figures show that generally about one third of those resident in the island who came from the British Isles were female – although, largely as a result of the influx of skilled male workers in the middle years of the century, in the 1860s the proportion became slightly less than one in five.⁴⁹

Many of these women no doubt came as the wives or daughters of male migrants. However, although the nineteenth century was an age of restrictions for, in particular, white women in Cuba, those of foreign birth (and particularly those coming from the British Isles or North America) were generally excluded from such controls. A North American visitor to Havana in the 1880s observed that:

A woman of respectability is scarcely ever seen walking in the streets, unless she is a foreigner, or of the lower class, such as sellers of fruit, etc.... Cuban etiquette says that a lady must not be seen on the streets except in a vehicle, and only Americans, English and other foreigners disregard the rule.⁵⁰

Foreign women were likewise more likely to obtain employment, in particular as teachers or domestic servants – largely depending on their class origins.

⁴⁸ Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with pen and pencil* (Hartford, 1871), quoted in Louis A Perez, Jr, *Slaves, sugar and colonial society: Travel accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1992), p.75

⁴⁹ *Cuadro Estadístico*, 1847; De Toledo, *Noticias Estadísticas*; US War Dept, *Informe sobre el censo*

⁵⁰ Maturian Murray Ballou, *Due South; or Cuba Past and Present* (Boston, 1885), quoted in Pérez, *Slaves, sugar and colonial society*, pp.30-1

As the Cuban economy became oriented towards the English-speaking world, there was an increasing demand for English language classes. Newspapers of the time abounded with advertisements for English courses and schools, and it seems that it was more likely to be a woman than a man who was imparting the lessons:

An English or American lady is sought, whose conduct can be vouched for, who wishes to serve as assistant to a teacher of English in a college and to talk continuously in this language to the girls...⁵¹

In the census of 1899, just three “British” men in the whole of Cuba gave ‘teacher’ as their occupation, compared with 18 women (8% of the total number of “British” women living in the island at the time).⁵² These teachers were not just imparting lessons in established schools, or by private appointment to wealthy families. They were also setting up new schools, as with a Girls School in Trinidad, with 19 pupils, in the street of San José, established and directed by Anastasia Wanworth.⁵³ In fact, the methods that were being introduced into the new public schools being established by the Sociedad Económica, followed the English Lancaster and Bell model.⁵⁴

At the other end of the social spectrum, domestic service provided employment for many foreign working class women. Again, this was an occupation where women were more likely to be found than men. In 1899, of the 67 “British” servants recorded, 41 were women.⁵⁵ But, as with every other area of Cuban social and economic life, a hierarchy existed within domestic service, and it seems that it was one that would have placed many of these “British” women in a privileged position amongst their peers. White servants were anyway generally considered to be of higher rank than black servants. The household of George and Grace Canning Backhouse in El Cerro (an affluent district on the outskirts of Havana) consistently employed six local servants (an under nurse, a cook, a washerwoman, a housemaid, a gardener and a service boy). Some were Cuban or Canary Island-born white servants. These ranked above the free black servants, who likewise had a higher status than the rented slaves.

⁵¹ *Gaceta de la Habana*, 21 Aug. 1855

⁵² US War Dept, *Informe sobre el censo*

⁵³ *Guía de Forasteros*, 1840, p.115

⁵⁴ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, 1820/1823, p.62

⁵⁵ US War Dept., *Informe sobre el censo*

But above them all was Hilton, the young English housemaid who came to Cuba accompanying the family (and, for a short time, another English maid, Caroline Langley). Hilton, although a servant, was second only to Grace herself in the running of the household, and she seems to have acted with some tyranny towards the black servants who were under her.⁵⁶

Working class women from the British Isles did not just find domestic employment in houses, but might also work as washerwomen. Even here, despite the unglamorous and generally invisible nature of such an occupation, race continued to dominate identity. Mary Gallagher, an Irish woman long resident in Havana, might have been looked down upon and abused by the authorities for being a mere washerwoman. But she was white, and owned a slave – and when she found herself in difficulties was able to seek the help of socially better-placed British migrants. When her young slave Enrique was arrested by the local police, who then proceeded to attempt to extort money from Mary ‘she applied to ... the Clerk of an English merchant, Mr Tennant, who agreed to return to the Commissary and intercede with him for Enrique’s restoration’.⁵⁷

How British were the “British” migrants?

There is a tendency in most accounts of migration to define the history along national grounds, looking at groups with common points of departure and arrival, and making an assumption of a certain commonality of interest based on national origin. In the case of migrants from the British Isles, however, it is difficult to discern a distinct “British” community in Cuba, and such that there was, was complicated by the highly ambiguous allegiance towards such an identity displayed not just by the migrants themselves, but also by the authorities.

There is ample evidence that claims made to national community were only done so for convenience – either in times of crisis, or in order to make commercial gain; rather than out of a genuine, deep-rooted sense of national identity. That this should be so should be of no surprise. After all, every one of the migrants, albeit for a variety of personal reasons, had

⁵⁶ Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: the Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth Century Havana* (New York, 1998), pp.35-7

⁵⁷ ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, Legajo 844, #28326

made the decision to abandon the land of their birth to make a new life for themselves in a very different society. Although this does often lead to an exaggerated sense of national self-definition on the part of migrants, migration involves an inherent rejection of nation, which at the very least makes such a definition of migrant identity complex.

In the case of British merchants in Cuba, they were not tied to specifically British interests. While they certainly did play on the image generated by a British surname as leading to suppositions on the part of others that this might give them privileged access to British markets or capital, when it came to trading as such their priorities were much more purely defined by free market concerns, and the imperative of making as much money as possible from whatever source it might come.

One of the most prominent merchant families of British descent in Cuba at this time – the Drakes – is a case in point. James (eventually known by all as Santiago) Drake married into one of the foremost families in the local aristocracy. His wife, Carlota del Castillo, was a daughter of the Marqués de San Felipe y Santiago. His offspring clearly felt little in the way of British national identity. One of his sons, Carlos Drake y del Castillo, became ennobled as the Conde de Vega Mar, exerted influence on the Spanish Court in Madrid, and considered himself to be ‘Cuban by birth and Spanish for family affection and interests’.⁵⁸ His elder brother, Santiago, spent more time occupying himself with the family firm (Drake Hermanos). This was one of the most powerful merchant houses of Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century, partly as a result of the advantage they were able to make of their name. When the London merchant bankers, Frederick Huth & Co, needed to have agents acting on their behalf, in the overseeing of debts contracted by various other landowners and merchants, they turned to the Drake brothers.⁵⁹ Many of the British ships coming into Havana in the period were chartered by their house, as can be seen in the newspapers of the time. However, only a small proportion of their direct trading was done with Britain. In 1841, just three percent of their sugar and two percent of their coffee was being sent to Britain⁶⁰, at a time when around 14%

⁵⁸ Ely, 1961

⁵⁹ University College London, Frederick Huth papers, Volume 174, Spanish letters 1842

⁶⁰ MC, MF, Box 235, Legajo 1, #24

of Cuba's overall exports were going there.⁶¹ In fact, after the United States, the company was trading more heavily with Spain, France, Germany and even Russia, than with the country in which the family supposedly had their origins. That they did not consider themselves British at all is highlighted in a letter written by Santiago Drake in 1841, to Henry Coit (a North American associate of the family), in which he refers to British abolitionism:

... unfortunately we are very weak in ourselves and have many strong enemies, as that I consider the state of my poor country [i.e. Cuba] very precarious; but in one point we are strong & unanimous, and that is in declaring ourselves independent, the instant any attempt be made in Spain to destroy our rights as owners of the slaves we now hold.⁶²

While the Drakes were highly influential in the West of Cuba, at the other extreme of the island, in Oriente, a similar role was being played by the Brooks. In the 1830s, Thomas Brooks established himself as a merchant in Santiago de Cuba. His family never became as creolised as the Drakes did. In fact, by the end of the century, the second and third generations were still listed as being British rather than Cuban nationals.⁶³ They also managed to maintain certain trappings of English-ness: importing tea, apparently more for their private consumption than for sale;⁶⁴ and even travelling from time to time to Britain.⁶⁵ However, like the Drakes, the Brooks showed little commercial concern for their country of origin, playing a much more important role in the penetration of North American produce and capital than of British. Indeed, Thomas Brooks himself served not as British, but as United States consul in the 1850s,⁶⁶ and was barred from serving the British state in this capacity due to the considerable number of slaves that the family owned on their coffee and sugar plantations in the area.⁶⁷ The Brooks family continued to represent United States commercial and consular interests in the province until around the turn of the century.⁶⁸

⁶¹ *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*

⁶² MC, MF, Box 234, Legajo 1, #2

⁶³ ANC, Miscelánea de Libros, #856

⁶⁴ MC, MF, Box 235, Legajo 33, #2

⁶⁵ MC, MF, Box 235, Legajo 52, #19

⁶⁶ MC, MF, Box 235, Legajo 42, #1

⁶⁷ Charles Clarke, British Consul at Santiago de Cuba, to Earl of Aberdeen, Santiago de Cuba, 12 Dec. 1842 (PRO, FO 72/634)

⁶⁸ See Brooks Papers, Boston Public Library

While middle class migrants of British origin might make use of a supposed British identity for commercial gain, working class migrants may have been more likely to claim British status in times of crisis. Though the support of prominent compatriots might have at times been sought, it was generally to the British consuls that the migrants in distress would turn. One particularly prominent example of this occurred in 1844, when a number of British-born machinists, amongst others working on the sugar estates and railways, were accused of complicity in the so-called Escalera conspiracy for a slave uprising. Several of them were arrested and thrown into prison, while they awaited the outcome of the judicial investigation being carried out by the Military Commission. In the end, none of them were found guilty and all were released.⁶⁹ During their imprisonment, representations were made to the British government for assistance through the Consul General at Havana, Joseph Crawford, who readily provided what assistance he could. However, in later years he complained that it would be considerably easier for him to provide such help, if it wasn't for the fact that such working class migrants very rarely made their presence known to him, and then only in such extreme circumstances:

They come and go and I hear of them, or know nothing of them, unless they get into distress, or trouble, and so it is, that so many of them die, unknown to me and their effects are made away with by dishonest persons, who are too often their companions.⁷⁰

Clearly the working class British migrants felt no normal need to lay claim to any official British identity.

Spanish law confused the situation still further. By a Royal Order of 21 October 1817, declared at the time that permission was given for an influx of foreign colonists, the basic law that would govern the presence of foreigners in the island was laid down. In this it was stated that after five years of residence, those that wished to remain would have to swear allegiance

⁶⁹ None of the white ones, that is. Joseph Kelly, a free coloured British subject, native of New Providence, and carpenter on a sugar plantation, was found guilty and sentenced to 10 years hard labour in the Ceuta penal colony. Robert Prior and George Tregent, both free coloured British subjects, were acquitted, but nevertheless expelled from the island, as was Daniel Kelly, the brother of Joseph. None of the whites were forced to leave.

⁷⁰ Joseph T Crawford to Lord John Russell, Havana, 28 Sept. 1861 (PRO, FO 72/1013)

to the Spanish Crown and laws, and renounce any protection they might expect to receive by virtue of being of foreign birth. In a later law, this was reiterated, and it was specifically stated that no recourse would be allowed to the diplomatic assistance of the country in which they were born. They would become, to all intents and purposes, Spanish subjects.⁷¹ However, in practice the full letter of the law was rarely put into effect. This was partly because of its strict demands that all foreigners in Cuba had to be Roman Catholic: increasingly impractical as the island came to depend upon skilled workers from Britain and North America – predominantly Protestant countries. Nothing would be said until the foreign resident found him or herself in a sticky situation, and tried to seek assistance from the Consul, who would usually take up the case only to be rudely told by the Spanish authorities that they could have no jurisdiction, since the individual concerned had long since become Spanish; and if they hadn't declared themselves Spanish, then they should have done, and must either subject themselves to the law, or else leave the island. The arbitrary application of these laws was revealed in 1837, when the British Consul at Havana, Charles Tolmé, attempted to secure the property of John Pascoe (a British railroad worker) who had died, and whose effects the Court of the Effects of the Dead⁷² had taken possession of, on the grounds that he was 'employed in the public service' and had therefore acquired 'the character of a Spanish citizen', and to have lost 'that of a British subject'. As Tolmé sarcastically pointed out to the Spanish Judge:

If all who work on the Railroad thus change their national character I am sorry I did not know it before, for I should have had to turn over to the Government of Her Catholic Majesty as Spanish subjects some hundreds of poor Irish labourers who in my simplicity I administered relief to.⁷³

However, it seems that eventually the British government itself became tired of the claims to British subjecthood at times of distress by the burgeoning numbers of British and Irish workers who had migrated. On 11 July 1856, a notice was placed by the government in the *Gazette*:

⁷¹ PRO, FO 72/888

⁷² Tribunal de Difuntos. This court was charged with determining what should be done with the affairs and property of those who died intestate. It was notoriously corrupt, charging exorbitant 'fees' for its 'services', and became a sore diplomatic point between the British and the Spanish throughout the mid-19th century, as the property of British subjects dying intestate in Cuba became siphoned off.

⁷³ Charles Tolmé to the Judge of the Effects of the Dead, Havana, 18 Dec. 1837 (PRO, FO 72/888, Case 4)

... warning all persons who may leave the United Kingdom under engagements for employment abroad as Railway Labourers, Miners, Engineers, Stokers, Firemen on board Steam-vessels, or in any other capacity, that they are not considered by Her Majesty's Government to be entitled to relief as distressed British subjects or to be sent back to this country at the Public expense.⁷⁴

That the new restrictions made no mention of merchants who had lived abroad for many years, and who periodically needed official representation to help their business interests; nor of any group other than of migrant workers, provides a clear indication of just how inclusive the British state considered "British"-ness to be.

The question of what to be "British" in Cuba meant was still further complicated by the fact that many who would probably in normal circumstances not just not consciously seek to assert a national identity, but who might even have a certain antipathy to such an identity, nevertheless were quick to claim to be British when the need arose and they thought they might benefit from so doing. Most of the Irish navvies working in the construction of Cuban railways seem to have already emigrated from the British Isles to North America. They were then contracted in the United States to travel to Cuba to work for a period. However, the conditions they found themselves working under were, in many circumstances, barbaric – in some cases leading to death, due to the harsh punishments meted out. Yet, despite the fact that these were migrants who not only had left Britain behind, but – as Irish Catholics – may never have considered themselves truly British in the first place, rather than applying for help from the United States Consul, they turned immediately to the British Consul when they found themselves unable to stand the conditions any longer, and wanted assistance in returning home (not to Ireland, or Britain, it has to be said, but to the United States).

However strange it might be that they sought in such moments to define themselves as British, such migrants at least had some genuine claim to British assistance – after all their homeland, even if they had abandoned it, was a British colony. There were, however, others who claimed a British identity to try to secure official help when they probably had no legitimate

⁷⁴ Joseph T Crawford to Earl of Clarendon, Havana, 25 Aug. 1856 (PRO, FO 72/902)

claim. This was particularly the case with sailors, whose identity was sufficiently mobile to enable them to shift national colours almost at will – perhaps partly a reflection of the very multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of life on the ships, in which an individual might move between ships of different countries, signing on in one port to cross the Atlantic, possibly then deserting and seeking better terms (or a less abusive captain) in another.⁷⁵ In 1841, John Williams was imprisoned in the Royal Prison in Havana, having been discovered on the beach, without papers, near Bacuranao – East along the coast from the capital. It proved almost impossible to determine what nationality he really was, since he himself variously claimed to be both English (from the crew of HMS Pilot) or North American (from the American ship Louisa), depending upon which Consul he was soliciting assistance from.⁷⁶ That same year, the British Consul, David Turnbull, pleaded the case of two other sailors – William Ewing and Henry Nowell – who had been arrested on charges of robbery from the house of Daniel Warren, the North American-born licensed shipping agent in Havana. He asserted that, since they were English, he had every right to defend their case. However, the local authorities were not so inclined, because:

...at the time they claimed, as American citizens (which they are), the protection of the Consul of the United States who refused it, since he had no right to intervene in the justice of the country. They then claimed, as English subjects (which they are not) the protection of the English Consul, and the commander of Her Majesty's war ship [the Romney]...⁷⁷

If it was only really at times of crisis, or for commercial gain, that migrants of British origin laid claim to a British identity, in everyday life it is probable that they defined themselves in a much more fluid manner. Although official statistics might have sought to break the migrant community in Cuba up into its national components, in actual fact such divisions would have appeared to be almost arbitrary to the migrants themselves. It might be expected that British and North American immigrants would recognise a certain shared identity. However, the breakdown of clear national divisions was a far wider phenomenon than that. It might be more

⁷⁵ Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London & New York, 2000)

⁷⁶ ANC, FGSC, Legajo 847, #28502

⁷⁷ ANC, FGSC, Legajo 844, #28348

useful to talk of a migrant Atlantic (or at least North Atlantic) community in Cuba at this time, rather than so many different national groupings.

There certainly was competition occurring between the different nations, both politically and commercially, in this period. In the development of the railways, British technology lost out at an early date to North American, although it continued to be principally British capital that was investing in railway construction.⁷⁸ French, British and North American machine and engine manufacturers competed for the growing plantation market: the former being renowned for their cheapness, the latter for their power, however, for 'works ... requiring niceness ... and for such machinery as for strength and durability may be depended upon the English maker must be applied to.'⁷⁹ However, those who had taken up residency in Cuba showed no clear preference for their country of origin over any other. While agents for the different companies were entering into quite cutthroat competition with one another, resident engineers such as Charles Edmonstone were so unconcerned about national identity that it is next to impossible to determine exactly where he originally came from. In a leaflet advertising his services in the acquisition of steam engines and other machinery, he boasts of ordering the merchandise from 'the United States, England or wherever the buyer wishes to give his preference'.⁸⁰ There are also signs that the British and Irish working class presence in Cuba was part of a wider Atlantic migrant working class. It has been suggested that the so-called *Irlandeses* or Irish navvies involved in the construction of the railroad were in fact a motley crew of migrant workers, that included, alongside the proverbial Irish navvies, British, Germans, Dutch, and North Americans.⁸¹

Even consular activity at this time reveals a lack of national specificity, despite the consuls being charged with representing specific national concerns. In most cases the consuls, and even more so the vice-consuls who they appointed, were themselves migrant merchants who had lived in Cuba for many years. As has already been mentioned, Thomas Brooks, although

⁷⁸ Zanetti & Garcia, *Sugar and Railroads*

⁷⁹ Consular Trade Report for 1851, Crawford to Palmerston, 31 Dec. 1851, PRO, FO 72/793

⁸⁰ MC, MF, Legajo 234, No.27.1 (Translation by the present writer)

⁸¹ See Eduardo Moyano Bazzani, 'Los recursos humanos en la construcción del primer ferrocarril cubano', in *Arbor: Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura*, nos.536-537 (1990), pp.189-202; also Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads*, pp.116-24

British by birth, became United States consul in Santiago de Cuba. The German William Lauten was appointed British Vice-Consul at Manzanillo on the basis of having spent five years living in England, and speaking fluent English; he was already the Vice-Consul there for Bremen.⁸² The British Vice-Consul for Puerto Príncipe, Nuevitas and Gibara from 1856, Pedro Sanchez Dolz, was variously described as Spanish or Cuban.⁸³ These consular representatives did not see themselves as limited to protecting the interests of one particular nation. In 1856, British Vice-Consul William Sydney Smith was praised for the assistance he was giving in Trinidad to French residents.⁸⁴

Such camaraderie and community of interest amongst the North Atlantic merchant and professional class was seen in other issues that at first sight might appear to be clear evidence of British community in Cuba. One particularly sore point was the question of religious worship, since no religion outside the Roman Catholic church was openly permitted to exist in the island. In 1839, a letter was sent to the Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston, from 'the British residents at Havannah being desirous to have the benefit of the services of an English Chaplain at that place'. The assistance of the British government was looked for in seeking to pressure the Spanish government in Madrid to make an exception, and to grant them 'permission to perform Divine worship according to the forms of the Church of England'. As specifically British a request as this might sound, the attached list of contributors to the fund to pay for such a chaplain includes generous donations from a broad cross-section of the middle class, non-Spanish population of Havana. British names are joined with Germans, French and North Americans (including the United States Consul, Nicholas Trist) in raising an annual subscription of \$1,575.⁸⁵ It would seem that the beleaguered, foreign Protestant community thought it best to group together under a single flag of convenience in order to achieve their ends. Despite their efforts, however, they were not successful in this. Two years later, the then British Consul, David Turnbull, was still raising an 'earnest prayer' on behalf 'of the British and other protestant inhabitants of the Havana, for the intercession of Her Majesty's Government, in obtaining for them the consolations of their religion'. He variously offered to

⁸² PRO, FO 72/1041

⁸³ PRO, FO 72/1014 and FO 72/944

⁸⁴ PRO, FO 72/902

⁸⁵ J D Powles to Viscount Palmerston, Freemans Court, 19 June 1839 (PRO, FO 72/538)

read services himself in his own house, or to set aside a room in the planned Guardian's house at the 'new Burying Ground', where Protestant funeral services might be held.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Nation, far from providing a convenient boundary within which to be studying the history of migrants from the British Isles in Cuba, was therefore a highly ambiguous source of identity. This should not be surprising, since Cuban society in the nineteenth century was itself not simply defined along national boundaries, but was fractured along a number of interacting lines: black and white; workers and employers; men and women. The experience and identity of migrants were, therefore, the result not simply of their being foreigners with a shared national origin, but also a question of skin colour, of socio-economic class, and of gender. While being "British" did play a part in this complex insertion into Cuban society, what being "British" meant, if anything, can only be understood with reference to the position that the migrants occupied in relation to the class, race and gender divisions that they found themselves participating in. While clearly there were situations in which a certain sense of Britishness could be appealed to, that it is next to impossible to clearly discern the boundaries of a British community in Cuba is testimony to the complex identities of these migrants, and their multi-dimensional involvement in Cuban society.

It is here, perhaps, that the significance of "British" migrants in nineteenth-century Cuba lies. Never sufficiently numerous to form a clearly identifiable ethnic grouping in their own right, it was the manner of their insertion into Cuban society and economy that led to them playing a disproportionately large part in the development of Cuba during the period. Not only were they concentrated in the economically most important parts of the country, in particular where the sugar industry was being most strongly developed, but also in occupations that were of crucial importance. "British" merchants were significant in Cuba's international maritime trade, and also in the introduction of machinery, railways and other innovations. "British" professionals were prominent in areas previously all but ignored, such as medicine, teaching and engineering. Above all, migration to Cuba from the British Isles, during most of the century, was largely working class. Though this included labourers, domestic servants and sailors, it

⁸⁶ David Turnbull to Earl of Aberdeen, Havana, 18 Nov. 1841 (PRO, FO 72/586)

most importantly saw the arrival of many skilled workers: in particular machinists, coming to operate and maintain the steam engines and machines that were being introduced in the sugar plantations, mines and railways.

It is hard to discern to what extent migration from the British Isles to Cuba led to permanent settlement in the island, and this in itself is evidence of the lack of a distinct “British” community. This “British” input into the island’s ethnic mix is now remembered only through isolated family reminiscences on the part of Cubans who had a British ancestor. Albert Harvey, a mine engineer at El Cobre, was buried there in 1882, having died of yellow fever. He left behind a family, having married a local woman, Juan Guerra. His descendents continued to live in Santiago de Cuba well into the twentieth century, although most seem to have subsequently migrated.⁸⁷ The influential Brooks, Beattie and Mason families, also in Oriente, continued to be important in the province into the twentieth century, by which time they had become firmly creolised.⁸⁸ The descendents of Albert Barefoot of Berkshire still live in Cojímar, a fishing village to the East of Havana. Albert travelled to Cuba in 1886 with his French wife, Maria Virginia Lalande, breaking all communication with the family in Britain. In 1995, the Cuban Barefoots and their long-separated British cousins finally found each other again. For the British Barefoots, the migration of Albert had long formed a blank spaced in their family history.⁸⁹

While some migrants clearly did establish themselves permanently in the island, others either returned to Britain, or continued their migration after a few years working in Cuba, to finally settle in North America. William Henry Ross migrated to Cuba as a young man in 1843, to work as a machinist.⁹⁰ He there made the acquaintance of Edward Beanes, also originally a machinist, who later became an agent in Havana for engineering companies.⁹¹ The two of them succeeded in saving sufficient money, and to obtain sufficient experience, to enable them to return to Britain and set up together in business, around 1860. Although both Scots,

⁸⁷ Personal communication with Guillermo Luis Pérez del Castillo, a grandson of Harvey, Aug. 2001.

⁸⁸ Personal communication with Helene Boissy and Margarita Mason, descendents of the Brooks-Beattie –Mason clan, Oct.-Nov. 2001.

⁸⁹ Documents and notes from Barefoot family scrapbook, with thanks to Yolanda Barefoot.

⁹⁰ ANC, ML, #11910

⁹¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 11 Oct., 1850, reproduced in Thomas Kerr, *A practical treatise on the cultivation of the sugar cane and the manufacture of sugar* (London, 1851)

rather than return to Scotland they based themselves in Liverpool, from where they partly designed and made their own pieces of sugar equipment, but also acted as a channel for the steam engines and sugar mills of such large engineering firms as Mirlees Watson, or W & A McOnie.⁹² James Herring, the mine carpenter at El Cobre previously referred to, 'eventually migrated to the USA where he went into the oyster business in Connecticut.'⁹³

Since during the nineteenth-century the British Consulates in Cuba maintained no consistent record of British and Irish residents in the island, there is little beyond general census statistics and such individual anecdotal information from which to determine the extent to which migrants from the British Isles remained settled in the island. It might be that there were simply not enough to lead to the establishment of a clearly defined community. Those that did arrive might have been acquainted with others of the same nationality, but would have needed to engage with other circles from the start in order to survive. To a certain extent this seems to have led to the finding of common ground by non-Spanish immigrants; but even that would have proven ephemeral as a source of identity. In the long term, those migrants who remained, rather than affirming what elements of British identity they might have brought with them (and which would mark them out as different to the rest of Cuban society) seem to have opted for creolisation. Since, during much of the period, to be identified as "British" would often lead to acts of random official aggression, they became Cuban – albeit adding their own particular experiences and notions to that ethnic mix – with only the distant memory of British ancestry being carried down through the generations, in the course of which even their surnames came to disappear through marriage, and all contact with their families back in the British Isles lost.

⁹² Glasgow University Archives and Business Record Centre, UGD 118

⁹³ Annotations made to the Diary of James Herring of Polgrath, Cornwall (privately obtained from a Cornish American by Sharron Schwartz, of the Institute of Cornish Studies, University of Exeter, and kindly made available to the present author).

TABLES

Table 1 - Distribution of "British" residents by province(Source: *Cuadro Estadístico*, 1847; Armildez de Toledo 1864; US War Dept 1899)

	1847		1862		1899	
Pinar del Río	0	0%	22	2%	10	1%
Havana	241	40%	489	39%	314	47%
Matanzas	103	17%	385	31%	44	7%
Las Villas	47	8%	132	11%	60	9%
Camagüey	17	3%	25	2%	31	5%
Oriente	197	32%	191	15%	207	31%
Total	605	100%	1,244	100%	666	100%

Table 2 – "British" migrant merchants and landowners in Cuba(Source: *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*, 1818-1819; Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), *Miscelánea de Libros*, #11910 & #11397; US War Dept, 1899)

	Number of "British" merchants/landowners	Total number of "British" with occupations	Merchants/landowners as % of total "British"
1818-1819	6	253	2%
1843-1847	19	163	12%
1865-1870	11	74	15%
1899	67	340	20%