

# MIGRANTS IN THE MEDIA

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Newspapers, advertising, popular music, radio and television broadcasts offer a wealth of resources for investigating local history. This article explores aspects of the first televisual accounts of post-war migration and its representation of Black people as they settled in the Midlands.

## News Reports

**B**irmingham was the location of major broadcast production by the BBC (from 1927 in radio, 1950 in television) and ATV (later Central, from 1955). Outside of London, it is also the centre of the greatest concentration of Black migrants and their descendants in the UK. So what does the contemporary broadcast news tell us about the beginnings of post-war migration and reactions to it? The Media Archive Central England (MACE) is a useful starting point.

MACE is an exceptional resource that holds and makes available online to the public a vast range of material from news reports of commercial TV in the Midlands. These include establishing shots and location footage of events, interviews and the comments and analyses of reporters to camera. The catalogue preserves original descriptions of the material, recording the language of the period and the priorities of the newsroom.

## Migrants as a 'Curio'

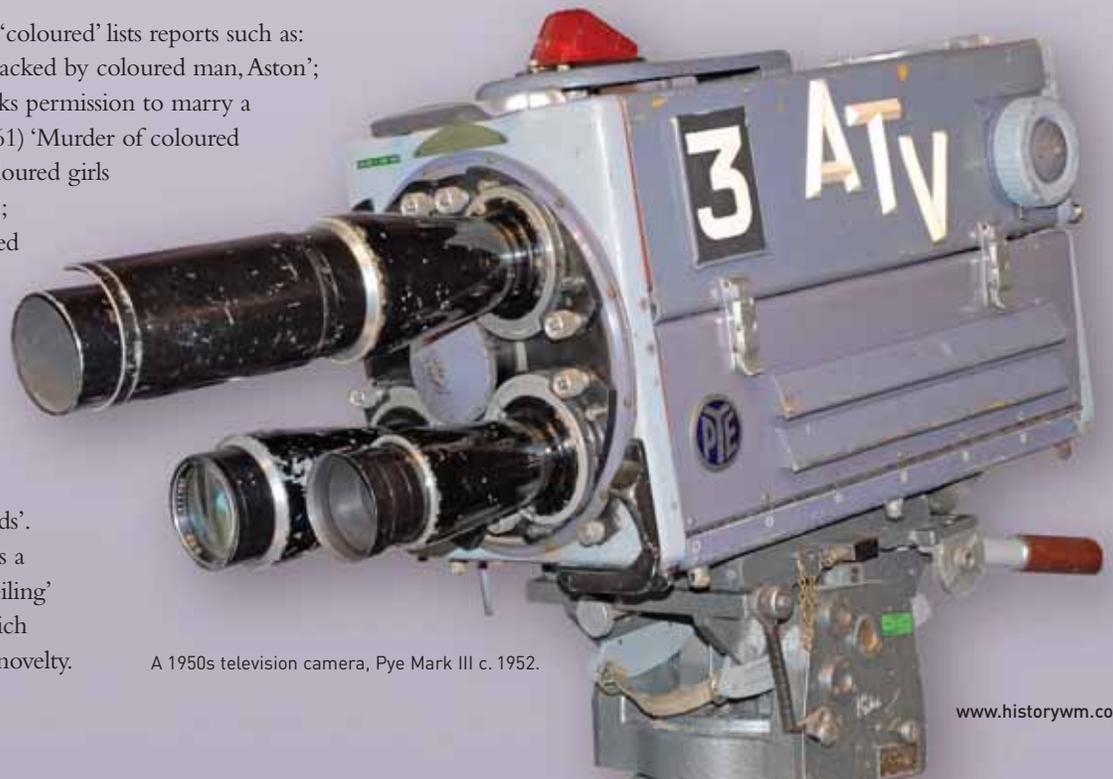
A search for the archaic term 'coloured' lists reports such as: (13 May 1957) 'White girl attacked by coloured man, Aston'; (26 July 1960) 'White girl seeks permission to marry a coloured man'; (5 January 1961) 'Murder of coloured woman'; (9 March 1961) 'Coloured girls v England girls netball match'; (20 December 1962) 'Coloured publican at Leicester'; (24 November 1965) 'Housing estate in Wednesfield where no houses must be sold to coloured families'; (16 September 1966) 'First coloured priest in the Midlands'.

In this brief sample, there is a glimpse of the televisual 'unveiling' of migrants, a moment in which they are treated as a curio or novelty.

Thus, what appear to be the most banal of occurrences – that a publican or groom is Black, for instance – are remarkable enough to merit coverage as news. Overall, these reports serve to position Black people as an object to be spoken of and looked at.

## 'Race as a Problem'

In tandem with this curiosity one can detect here the emergent discussion of 'race as a problem': the very presence of Black people seemed to engender anxieties over the economy, crime, social organisation and sexual relations. For instance, in a report dated 7 December 1964 entitled 'Smethwick Race Question', local people, both White and Black, were asked their views on race relations in the street and the 'housing situation'. White interviewees talk about being 'outnumbered' by Blacks moving in, commenting that they bring TB, a fact 'confirmed' in an oblique reference by one woman to 'people who know'.



A 1950s television camera, Pye Mark III c. 1952.

This particular report came in the aftermath of the notorious campaign for the seat of Smethwick in the General Election of 1964 in which the very street featured in the report played a symbolic role. Successful Tory candidate Peter Griffiths overturned the Labour incumbent with a campaign run on the slogan: 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Liberal or Labour'. The role of the media in this moment can be described as an amplifier, its coverage generating attention nationally and internationally. As MACE records, this event merited a visit from Malcolm X to the same location.

These themes and this association of the Midlands with the 'problem' of race were amplified again, intentionally so, when Enoch Powell chose to deliver a speech on the subject in Birmingham. Powell's biographer, Simon Heffer, records how Powell had warned the editor of *The Birmingham Post* and *Birmingham Evening Mail* in advance that his speech was 'going to go up "fizz" like a rocket'.

A host of local journalists and TV cameras were there to record the moment. Notwithstanding the more incendiary remarks made that day warning of future 'Rivers of Blood', Powell's intention, so he argued, was to challenge what he saw as a benign consensus view of immigration across the media. Newspapers, television and radio concealed the nature of the social threat, as he identified it, from invaders of an alien culture.

## A Different Perspective

In contrast to such pronouncements and the way in which television spoke about Black people, a singular example of a report that did seek to represent the perspective, diversity and humanity of this growing community of people was 'The Colony' (1964). Its distinctiveness was a result of the particular vision of its creator Philip Donnellan, a figure whose work and legacy has been barely acknowledged by the BBC itself or by historians of the media.

Donnellan was a documentarist based in Birmingham who felt particularly dissatisfied with the BBC's approach to its public service remit. At issue was the nature of the 'public' it assumed to address and those it did not. He recalls in his unpublished autobiography that he was conscious of the ways in which British society began to change in the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the post-war settlement. All about him was evidence of the challenge to traditional social divisions and deference located around authority and class. Confident explorations and celebrations of the vitality of working class life were found for instance in the theatre, novels and films of the so-called 'Angry Young Men'. This new world was there also in the presence and vitality of the culture of Black migrants. For Donnellan, little of this vista was adequately registered by the BBC, which was not only limited in its coverage but in the way it spoke of and to its audience rather than offering a space to include their voices.

Donnellan aimed to challenge this situation from his first film 'Joe the Chainsmith' (1958), which ventured into the Black Country. Here he sought out working people and, in subsequent films, went on to portray other under-represented groups, the Irish, travellers and Black migrants. He created a space in his films that would allow them to speak for themselves and about their concerns and opinions without any overt intercession from the authorial tones of the BBC in pursuit of what he considered to be a spurious objectivity. Conceived in this vein, 'The Colony' is one of the enduring achievements of Donnellan's career for the way in which he sought to represent the Black experience in Birmingham.

As he recalled in the autobiographical account of his professional life, the intention was not to examine 'colour prejudice' and certainly not to



Courtesy of the family of Philip Donnellan

Philip Donnellan at work on the 1964 BBC series 'Landmarks'.



Courtesy Ben Peissel

The BBC's former studios at Pebble Mill, Birmingham.



Courtesy Sandra Williams

Victor Williams who contributed to 'The Colony' in the early 1960s.



Wedding dress design by Janice Rider for Episode 9 of 'Empire Road', 1979.



Mellan Mitchell played Mr Kapoor in 'Empire Road'.

represent a superior 'White' perspective, which Donnellan felt was implied in news broadcasts and indeed the routine schedule which almost entirely ignored the Black minority. He writes: 'Our aim was to present what it felt like to be a West Indian, in Britain, in Birmingham, and to offer West Indians the chance to describe in their own way the feelings they had about Britain and the British.'

In order to fulfil this aim, Donnellan marshalled together a range of men and women who populate the film and give it its complex textures. They are seen and heard at home, in the workplace, at leisure, in prayer and participating in group discussions. Subjects speak directly to camera about their experiences, taking time to think about the insights they offer. In addition, a range of further, unidentified voices give testimonies that overlay the imagery that locates them in the day-to-day environment and interactions of the city.

### Imperial Connections

Donnellan identifies the imperial connections between the city, the nation and the Caribbean. We see a shot of Jamaica Row in the Bullring, and the camera explores a map of Jamaica itself, with its towns and counties named after those in the UK: Middlesex, Cornwall, Surrey. Migrants are seen visiting some of Birmingham's iconic spaces, exploring the history and ideas represented in the statue of Priestley, by the Science Museum and Aston Hall.

In this way, history hangs provocatively over this film, challenging the viewer to consider the reasons for the presence of Black people in the UK by reminding them of an imperial past. Bus Conductor Victor Williams visits the Science Museum and considers the heritage assembled there. He turns to address the camera and muses on the men of 'Enlightenment' Birmingham. They were tolerant, open-minded people: he asks what they would make of the contemporary condition.

What unfolds in response is not wholly positive. As one contributor complains: 'I love you but the majority of you don't love me. You can walk with me, talk with me, have a drink with me [but] the fact still remains that while you live you have a little something inside you, a little complex that says you are better than me.'

Another adds that despite his love of variety: 'the Englishman or the White man for that matter doesn't want the variety of the human species. He likes to see White only.' Thus, 'The Colony' turns the idea of immigration as a problem brought about by the presence of migrants back into a critique of the host culture, its hostility, suspicion and hypocrisies. The men and women featured are themselves contemporary colonists, shocked by rainy, dirty Britain and Birmingham and the ways in which they have been received.

'The Colony' stood out from other televisual fare by refusing to offer simple narrative resolutions or explanations for the questions it raised. Without the comforting authority of a narrator to explain or direct the viewer, plural insights were not reducible to rounded and easily explained conclusions. The film offered a picture of people who were varied and complex beings who were not easily labelled by a one-size-fits-all category such as 'coloured people' even as society (and the media, of course) deigned to so label them.

## Dramatisation

Across these different materials from the archive, we gain a sense of the emergent treatment by television of migration in the Midlands. As new communities became more firmly established, the Black experience and perspectives on Black people were also dramatised in an innovative series of programmes made in the Midlands.

For any historian of this subject, such fictions might prove as important as factual representations in helping to understand post-war local history. For instance, 'Rainbow City' of 1967 was produced and set in Birmingham, based in part around the problems faced by an inter-racial couple. Later, the English Regions Drama unit at Pebble Mill under the leadership of David Rose commissioned short films like 'A Touch of Eastern Promise' (transmitted 8 February 1973). This programme was shot entirely on film and on location in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, amongst the Asian communities it depicted.

Other films followed in this vein and began to offer platforms for Black artists to convey their experiences and concerns. 'Club Havana' (transmitted 25 October 1975), for instance, was written by Jamaican author Barry Reckord, directed by Pam Brighton and featured Don Warrington and Julie Walters. 'Black Christmas' (transmitted 20 December 1977) was written by Michael Abbensetts and directed by Stephen Frears. Abbensetts was also the author of two series of 'Empire Road' which was first

broadcast in October 1978. Set in a fictionally-disguised but recognisable Handsworth, Birmingham, it offered the rich layering of plot and incident familiar from soap operas in dealing with its multi-racial roster of characters and situations.

## What Kind of History?

So what kind of history do media sources offer? What do they add to other accounts? I suggest that the various media have become a primary site for our sense of ourselves, our sense of the social, of historical occurrence and its development.

We should note, however, that in utilising the media as a mode of historical record, we need to be aware also of the history of the media, its forms, organisation and rhetoric, its contemporary conventions and agendas, which influence its choice about what to present. ●

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### Further Reading

Media Archive Central England: [www.macearchive.org](http://www.macearchive.org)

Pebble Mill Studios: [www.pebblemill.org](http://www.pebblemill.org)

The friends of Philip Donnellan: [www.philipdonnellan.co.uk](http://www.philipdonnellan.co.uk)

Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: Black People in British Film and Television 1896-1996* (Continuum, 1996).

Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (Sage Publishers, 2002).

Jim Pines, (ed.), *Black and White in Colour: Black People in British Television Since 1936* (BFI Publishing, 1992).