Unsettled: Refugee Camps and the Making of Multicultural Britain

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Reviewer: Peter Gatrell

With her latest book, Jordanna Bailkin makes a singularly impressive contribution to 20th-century British history. Her focus is on the various sites that were built or, more commonly, re-purposed to hold refugees who reached Britain at various stages in the 20th century. Her wide-ranging approach allows her to cast fresh light on fairly familiar episodes, such as the arrival of Jewish and Basque refugees in the late 1930s, Hungarian refugees in 1956 and Ugandan Asians in the 1970s, but also to cover groups whose arrival in Britain is much less well known, such as Belgian refugees during the First World War, Anglo-Egyptians in the wake of the Suez crisis in 1956, and Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s. (However, she does not discuss Bosnian Muslim refugees in the 1990s.) Some of these episodes have been the subject of specialist study, much of it very recent.^[1] But, as we shall see, there is much to be gained from bringing these episodes within a single frame.

My first thought on reading *Unsettled* was to wonder why no-one has thought of doing this before now. The sources are abundant and for the most part readily accessible, even if they are scattered across the archives of different UK government departments as well as in numerous county record offices. This bureaucratic evidence can be supplemented by using national and local newspapers. Careful use of oral history will broaden the scope of the resource base, as Bailkin has done here. It is not as if we have had to wait for the disclosure of hitherto unavailable or inaccessible material.^[2] Perhaps a book such as this could only have been written in the light of current concerns about the so-called 'refugee crisis'.^[3] In any case, the appearance of *Unsettled* could not be timelier, even if the history it uncovers belongs in many respects to a different epoch.

Its timeliness is only in part related to current debates about refugees. *Unsettled* has a broader purpose, which is to configure refugee history as something more than an account of successive episodes of mass population displacement. Bailkin understands that refugee history must be written by also taking other actors into account, not to deny refugees a significant degree of agency and self-expression, but to locate their actions against the backdrop of the constraints imposed and the practices enforced by the modern state. In this regard, she draws productively upon the now extensive literature in refugee studies.^[4]

How, then, does Bailkin frame her research questions? She begins with a careful consideration of the term,

‘refugee’, noting that it is laden with multiple meanings, including the definition agreed in international law as per the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. She points out that being recognised as a Convention refugee affords a significant degree of protection as well as assistance, but that not everyone who has been displaced is recognised in this way. Asylum-seekers remain in limbo, awaiting an adjudication of their claims; internally displaced persons fall outside the Convention; and many states refuse to sign it. More to the point, in relation to Bailkin’s chosen case studies, it is important to acknowledge that individuals or groups of displaced people have refused the label, on the grounds that it is demeaning and also effaces alternative ways of representing one’s displacement, such as describing oneself as an ‘exile’, or an ‘evacuee’.

By addressing the discourse of displacement, Bailkin suggests that it is possible to cast familiar aspects of British history in a different light. This is partly about particular moments when people sought admission to the UK in order to escape from violence and persecution. Her approach is also designed to take account of the organised resettlement of British families after the Second World War. But she aims higher than this, arguing that we need to think about the close encounters between ‘refugees’ and ‘citizens’ or, as she puts it, between those who were settled and those who were unsettled.

The location of these encounters was the refugee camp, and it is on camps that Bailkin directs her gaze. Historians, she maintains, have focused too much on camps in totalitarian states, and have neglected camps in democratic societies. They proliferated in Britain during and after both world wars, often located in far-flung corners of the British Isles. With the exception of wartime internment camps, they enabled contact to be made between newcomers – Belgians in 1914, Basques in the 1930s, Poles in the 1940s, Ugandan Asians in the 1970s – and local residents. Multicultural Britain took shape in the orbit of the refugee camp. As she puts it, ‘interethnic and interracial encounters took place not only in Britain’s cities and seaports, but also in remote army bases and rural outposts’ (p. 11).

Far from there being refugee ‘crises’ that periodically disturbed the course of British history, Bailkin demonstrates instead that there were connections and continuities. This does not mean that successive governments had a clear or reproducible strategy; on the contrary, policy consisted of zig-zagging responses – and even, in an intriguing epilogue, plans, never needed but elaborately configured, to accommodate white settlers as Southern Rhodesia edged towards an independent Zimbabwe. Improvisation was nevertheless consistent with a template marked ‘camp’.

This does not mean that there was such a thing as a ‘typical’ refugee camp. Camps – sometimes designated ‘hostels’ by British officials, on other occasions described as ‘resettlement centres’ – varied according to size, spatial arrangement, location, function, longevity, and genealogy. *Unsettled* has striking observations about militarised sites, such as Greenham Common, which housed refugees from Uganda who were shocked to see men in uniform whose presence reminded them of Idi Amin’s regime.

In discussing the rationale and the social world of the refugee camp, Bailkin draws upon a rich ethnographic literature to challenge simplistic assumptions about incarceration.^[5] To be sure, she does not shy away from discussing the constraints imposed on residents, and she quotes the blistering denunciation by Mahmood Mamdani of the camps that housed Ugandan refugees which he regarded as intimidating and even ‘totalitarian’ in design and function.^[6] But although there is abundant evidence of misery and isolation, Bailkin has a more nuanced story to tell, and it is refreshing to see the refugee camp treated as a place of intermittent conviviality and self-realisation, rather than a place of pure abjection. In some instances, notably among Basque refugees, the camp served to intensify national identity and to sustain political consciousness, but this does not appear to have happened among Vietnamese. Class differences also mattered: Anglo-Egyptian refugees (not the word they chose to describe themselves) were deemed to require respectable accommodation; and the experiences of resettled Ugandan Asians differed according to status.

In support of this argument, Bailkin makes a good deal of the interactions between camp residents and the local population. Sometimes, they crossed paths, as when squatters sought temporary shelter inside the confines of the camp. These interactions took various forms. Volunteers and tradespeople (such as builders

and plumbers) came and went. Curious visitors looked around, and residents likewise wanted to venture further afield to satisfy their curiosity and alleviate boredom. Beyond these brief encounters, however, something even more significant was taking place. The camp served as a yardstick against which the British state could measure the progress of the welfare state. Was there a risk that provision made for camp residents might fall short of what the state made available to socially deprived British-born citizens, or might the latter resent the resources set aside for those in camps? These debates in Whitehall were played out against the setting of the refugee camp.

Unsettled contains some excellent images. There is an eye-catching map of the UK, with the location of around 100 key sites. Photographs give the reader an additional sense of the material form of the camp and the various emotions it evoked. Illustrations of Nissen huts that were re-purposed in the aftermath of war to accommodate displaced persons support Bailkin's argument about the constraints imposed by the refugee camp. These structures were cramped, very cold in winter and stifling (and smelly) in summer. Needless to say, they afforded refugees little privacy, although despite (or perhaps because of) this, Keele University students spoke with some affection of the huts in which they were housed in its early days.

It is probably unreasonable to ask for more in what is already an ambitious and very thoughtful book. But Bailkin does not have very much to say about refugees' sense of the places they left behind, apart from a brief discussion of traditions of food preparation and consumption. She is much more confident and illuminating when talking about the various ways in which refugees were portrayed in the British media or in the eyes of officialdom.

I also wanted to know more about the export and import of ideas around refugee camps. Bailkin begins by mentioning the well-known British use of camps in the South African War, but we are left in the dark as to whether and how British officials and aid workers overseas thought about the creation and operation of camps in colonial and post-colonial settings such as in Cyprus, Egypt and East Africa after the Second World War, and what mechanisms there might have been to transfer these ideas to a UK context.^[7]

Readers who wish to pursue some of the themes in *Unsettled* may also wish to look at the rich literature on refugee camps in Australia. Here, as in the UK, camps were created and recreated to accommodate successive cohorts of refugees, including European DPs and Vietnamese. The Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre in particular has been a fruitful site of study. Originally an army training site, it housed DPs after the Second World War and was subsequently taken back into army ownership before being turned into a heritage park. This site provides a forum for debating multiculturalism in Australia, in ways that were and still are more overt than in the UK. Bonegilla is, however, a complicated site of memory, in so far as its remoteness and modest provision for 300,000 migrants who passed through its gates stands in sharp contrast to the improved arrangements that were reportedly made for Vietnamese migrants.^[8] A more distressing comparison, from the perspective of 2018 at any rate, is with the terrible conditions in which asylum seekers are held in the offshore detention centre on Nauru in the Pacific Ocean.

Britain may have forgotten its refugee camps, and many of those who went through the revolving door of the refugee camp may have preferred to forget. Yet Bailkin's book is a reminder that efforts were made to provide desperate refugees with sanctuary. The welcome was often conditional and grudging. Plenty of refugees were never admitted to the UK in the first place or were resettled elsewhere. Certainly, camps usually offered basic facilities and little more. But the camp did offer a way out into mainstream British society. By contrast, the paralysis in today's international refugee regime ensures that the modern state incarcerates asylum seekers who reach Europe and deters others from attempting to enter. The prison cell has replaced the refugee camp as the state's device of choice. From this point of view, *Unsettled* offers a portrait of a vanished age.

^[1] Older works by historians include a pioneering book by Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century*

(London, 1999); Peter Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War* (New York, 1982); Kevin Myers, 'History, migration and childhood: Basque refugee children in 1930s Britain', *Family and Community History*, 3, 2 (2000), 147–57. New works include Becky Taylor, 'Their only words of English were "thank you": rights, gratitude and "deserving" Hungarian refugees to Britain in 1956', *Journal of British Studies*, 55, (2016), 120–44; "'Don't just look for a new pet": the Vietnamese airlift, child refugees and the dangers of toxic humanitarianism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52, 2-3 (2018), 195–209; and 'Good citizens? Ugandan Asians, volunteers and 'race' relations in 1970s Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), 120–41. These last two articles appeared too late for Bailkin to take them into account. Christoph Declercq and colleagues have made enormous strides in recovering the hidden history of Belgian refugees in Britain. This work has been brought together in *Belgian Refugees in First World War Britain*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkinson (London, 2018). The late Bill Williams published the fruits of decades of detailed research in *'Jews and Other Foreigners': Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933-1940* (Manchester, 2011).

[2] See the extensive sources used in Kushner and Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide*.

[3] Jessica Reinisch, "'Forever temporary": migrants in Calais, then and now', *Political Quarterly*, 86, 4 (2016), 515–22; Leo Lucassen, 'Peeling an onion: the "refugee crisis" from a historical perspective', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41, 3 (2018), 383–410.

[4] Peter Gatrell, 'Refugees – what's wrong with history?' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30, 2 (2017), 170–89.

[5] Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, IL, 1995). Another key work is Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford, 1986).

[6] Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Ugandan Asians Come to Britain* (London, 1973).

[7] Rakefet, Zalashik and Nadav Davidovitch, 'Measuring adaptability: psychological examinations of Jewish detainees in Cyprus internment camps', *Science in Context*, 19 (2006), 419–41.

[8] Alexandra Dellios, *Histories of Controversy: Bonegilla Migrant Centre* (Melbourne, 2017).

The author is happy to accept this review and thanks the reviewer for his thoughtful comments.

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