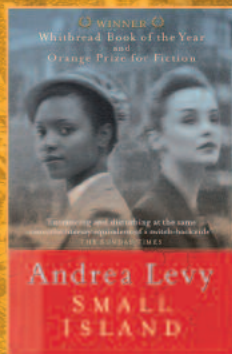


# Small Island

Read 2007

Melanie Kelly

Readers' Guide





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*West Indians arriving at Southampton, 24 October 1952  
(Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

# Introduction

*Small Island Read 2007* is the largest mass-reading project that has ever taken place in Britain. It is a community-based initiative that encourages everyone in the participating locations to read the same book at the same time. It promotes further reading, writing and creative work inspired by that shared experience, and this provides an accessible and innovative means of learning about our past.



Bristol school children travelling to Swindon to help promote the launch of the 2006 Great Reading Adventure (Neil Phillips).

The book that has been chosen for this exciting initiative is Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, a widely acclaimed novel that describes the arrival in post-war Britain of black Jamaican immigrants, the descendants of enslaved Africans. *Small Island Read 2007* is linked to the 2007 commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Slave Trade Abolition Bill – a year that is being used to explore the legacy of slavery and its continuing impact upon modern Britain. Andrea Levy's novel addresses the themes of identity, racial awareness, forgiveness, ignorance and survival with humour, high drama, anger and pathos, making it an unforgettable read and one that is a fitting topic for discussion in 2007.

*Small Island Read 2007* draws upon the success of two previous reading projects –



The Maritime Museum in Hull (Hull City Council).

Liverpool Reads (launched in 2004 with *Holes*) and the Great Reading Adventure (launched in Bristol in 2003 with *Treasure Island* and expanded to include the whole of the South West in 2006) – and brings in new partners from Aye Write! Glasgow and Hull Libraries. All four sites have links to the slave trade and its abolition.

Thousands of copies of *Small Island* will be available for loan from participating library services and will also be distributed for free through schools and colleges, reading and community groups, hospitals and other sites.

This readers' guide tells you about Andrea Levy and her work, looking particularly at *Small Island*. In addition it provides background material on the transportation of enslaved Africans to the colonies and the subsequent migration of later generations of black people from the Caribbean to Britain.

An expanded version of the guide, including additional background information, is available on the *Small Island Read 2007* website at [www.smallislandread.com](http://www.smallislandread.com). A list of questions is on the site that might be useful for prompting discussions within reading groups.



The Mitchell Library in Glasgow (Glasgow City Council).

The site also provides news of all the activities that are taking place over the next few months including talks, debates, workshops, reading group meetings and competitions, as well as material linked to the books chosen for younger participants in the project, Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* and Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace*. The guide itself can be downloaded from the site in both PDF and Word format, enabling readers to obtain the text in a layout that best meets their needs.

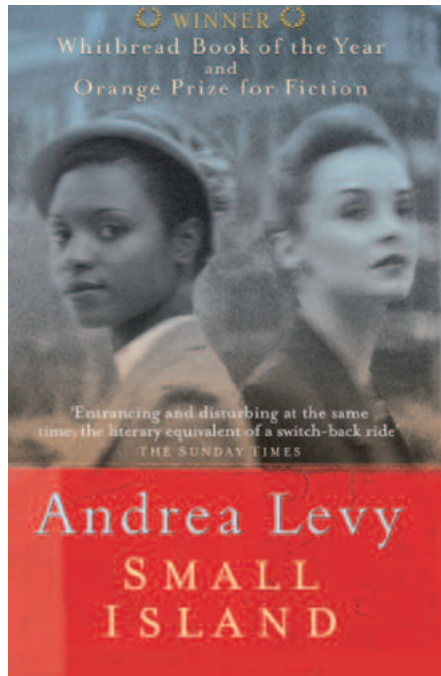
We hope you enjoy reading *Small Island* and joining in the *Small Island Read 2007* project.

Pupil in Liverpool reading Millions, 2006 (Liverpool Reads).



# Andrea Levy & Small Island

*Small Island* has been described by the critics as an 'engrossing read', 'a work of great imaginative power', 'funny, tender, intelligent', 'deft and striking', 'revealing and accomplished', 'beautifully crafted, compassionate' and 'an enthralling tour de force'.



The book is a tragicomedy that provides a fascinating and thoughtful portrait of post-war Britain and the first dynamic encounters between newly arrived black Caribbean immigrants and the resident white British population. It is narrated by four characters, each with their own perspective on the situation.

Gilbert, a Jamaican volunteer in the RAF, has returned to Britain on the *Empire Windrush*, having realised there are no opportunities for him back home. After his wartime experiences, he has few illusions left about the wonders of the 'Mother Country'. Hortense, his prissy school teacher wife, has followed Gilbert to Britain naively believing all she has been taught about the superiority of the British and her privileged place among them. Queenie, their Earls Court landlady, is a brash, big-hearted woman yearning for



Andrea Levy (Angus Muir).

excitement who has found herself stuck in a run-down house with disapproving neighbours. Bernard, Queenie's racist and outwardly dull husband, is movingly shown to have his own share of hopes and disappointments.

The story switches between the four voices and between 1948 and 'before' – as well as across three continents – to reveal how each person has reached this particular point in their life. The 'small island' of the title refers to Jamaica, once considered the 'big island' of the Caribbean but now seen as an insignificant place by those who have returned from the war. It also refers to Britain reluctantly waking up to the fact it no longer rules the world, the borders of its once global empire shrinking around it, as well as to the individual characters who are isolated from each other by their failure to communicate.

The book's author, Andrea Levy, is a Londoner whose parents came to Britain from Jamaica in the 1940s. *Small Island*, published in 2004, was her fourth novel and her breakthrough, an international bestseller that has won the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book of the Year, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Orange Best of the Best.

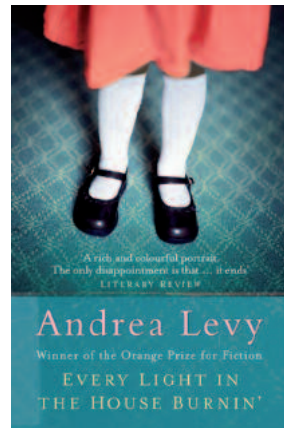
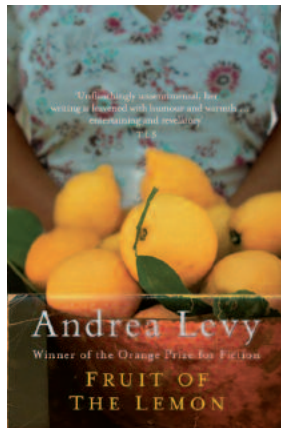
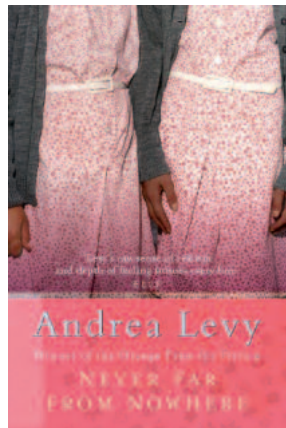
Her three previous novels were also critically acclaimed. *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) is the semi-autobiographical story of a Jamaican family living in London that shifts between the narrator's memories of growing up in the 1960s and her experiences in the present sitting by her dying father's bedside. It was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'a striking and promising debut'. *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) is about two sisters, daughters of Jamaicans,

who live on a London council estate in the 1970s. One of the sisters identifies herself as black while the other passes as white. The book was long-listed for the Orange Prize. *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), which won the Arts Council Writers' Award, is about a black Londoner who visits Jamaica and discovers a previously unknown family history.

In an online interview with the *Washington Post* in 2004, Andrea Levy said:

I love books that you feel once you've read them that they've added to the sum total of who you are. That you've learned something or you've been taken somewhere that was really worth going, because you understand something better now.

The first time she encountered a work of fiction that 'spoke' to her was at the age of 23 when she read Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*. She describes this as 'a profoundly moving thing', as until that moment she had associated novels with the slog of school examinations. She became an avid reader and in the interview she refers to other books she has particularly enjoyed since then, including Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. She has said elsewhere that she is inspired by the power of story telling which is able to start an intimate conversation between the writer and reader that leads to some kind of social change.



After winning the Whitbread for *Small Island*, Andrea Levy was asked in an interview why she wrote. She replied:

I really write this stuff because I want people to know about it. I don't think I could write for its own sake because sometimes it's not that much fun and it's quite lonely and quite scary because you've only got yourself to rely on and all sorts of things like that. I love it, I really do, but if I didn't have a passion, a real passion for what my subject is, I couldn't do it.

She began writing fiction in her early 30s. Her first three novels, with their exploration of the life of black British-born children of Jamaican immigrants, are more personal than *Small Island*, though this book too has its autobiographical aspect with its links to her parents' experience in coming to Britain.

*Small Island* has been her most far-reaching book to date. It took four-and-a-half years to complete and involved extensive research. Not all of the material Andrea Levy gathered found its way into the book, but by immersing herself in the period she had the confidence to create characters and situations that are well-rounded, believable and emotionally involving. In his *Guardian* review of the book, Mike Phillips wrote that the author's 'reliance on historical fact gives Levy a distance which allows her to be both

dispassionate and compassionate. The history also offers an opportunity to construct the characters in patient and illuminating detail'.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* recommended the book to 'anyone who enjoys a good, long read'. The review continued:

It's all here: exceptional dialogue, clever narrative, and a rich story that tells us something new about our shared history on a planet that is increasingly small and yet will always be inhabited by individuals possessed, at our best, by singular consciousness and desire. That *Small Island* creates such a world, so peopled, is its great success: With their graciousness in conflict and comedy in moments of despair, Levy's characters enlarge our lives even as their own life shrinks around them.

*The Sunday Times* critic Penny Perrick concluded her review of *Small Island* with the words:

If it weren't for Levy's light, mocking humour... this novel would be almost unbearable to read: a tragic litany of prejudice and the ingrained stupidity that is its cause. Every scene is rich in implication, entrancing and disturbing at the same time; the literary equivalent of a switchback ride.

We hope you enjoy the journey.

## Ignatius Sancho

Ignatius Sancho was born in 1729 on a slave ship a few days after it set sail from the coast of Guinea in West Africa to the Spanish colonies. Shortly after his family's arrival in Cartagena, Colombia, his mother died and his father committed suicide. Sancho's master sent the boy to England in 1731 as a gift to three sisters living in Greenwich. He had been baptised Ignatius by a bishop in Cartagena and the three sisters gave him the surname Sancho because he reminded them of Don Quixote's servant.

The sisters treated him badly, refusing to educate him in the belief that his ignorance would keep him obedient, and continually threatening to return him to the plantation. He was befriended by the Duke of Montagu and was later employed as butler to the Duke's family, a post he held for over 20 years.

On retirement, Sancho used his annuity from the late Duchess of Montagu to open a grocery shop where he sold sugar, rum and tobacco. It is ironic that he traded in goods produced by enslaved people, considering his life story and his abhorrence of the slave trade and British imperialism. In 1778, in a letter to Jack Wingrave, the son of a friend then living in Bombay, he wrote:

... you speak (with honest indignation) of the treachery and chicanery of the [Indian] natives. – My good friend, you should remember from whom they learnt those vices... I say... with reluctance, that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East [and] West Indies – and even on the coast of Guinea... I mentioned these only to guard my friend against being too hasty in condemning the knavery of a people who bad as they may be – possibly – were made worse by their Christian visitors.

Sancho wrote poems and plays based on his experiences in aristocratic life, as well as musical compositions, and made occasional stage appearances with the encouragement of the actor David Garrick. He is thought to have been the first black person to vote in a British election and he was the first to receive an obituary in the British press.

To abolitionists, Sancho was a symbol of African humanity and intelligence. Although this may now seem patronising, it was revolutionary at a time when slave traders denied that Africans could be the intellectual equals of white people in order to justify their abusive treatment of enslaved black people. Sancho's letters were posthumously published to widespread acclaim in 1782, two years after his death, and show the tensions he felt in being both a former enslaved African and a middle-class European.



*Ignatius Sancho by Thomas Gainsborough, 1768 (National Gallery of Canada). This portrait was painted in Bath.*

## William Wilberforce of Hull

2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Slave Trade Abolition Bill in Britain. William Wilberforce, the Hull MP, played a leading role in ending Britain's involvement in the trade. Inspired by the work of the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, Wilberforce submitted his first Abolition Bill to the House of Commons in May 1789. After two years of delaying tactics on the part of slave trade lobbyists, it was eventually defeated in 1791. Wilberforce resubmitted his Bill at regular intervals in the coming years. It finally received its Royal Assent in March 1807, having been passed in Parliament on 23 February with 283 votes in favour and only 16 against.

The following extract is from the three-and-half-hour speech Wilberforce made in the Commons on 12 May 1789.

Sir, the nature and all the circumstances of this Trade are now laid open to us. We can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot evade it, it is now an object placed before us, we cannot pass it. We may spurn it, we may kick it out of our way, but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it. For it is brought now so directly before our eyes that this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitudes of their grounds and of the principles of their decision.... Let not Parliament be the only body that is insensible to national justice. Let us make reparation to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing a trade upon true commercial principles, and we shall soon find the rectitude of our conduct rewarded by the benefits of a regular and growing commerce.



*William Wilberforce by John Rising, 1790 (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull City Council). This portrait depicts Wilberforce at the age of 29, when he was taking up the cause for the abolition of the slave trade in Parliament.*

Wilberforce died on 29 July 1833, three days after the final reading of the Emancipation Bill, which would ultimately bring an end to slavery in the British Empire. Wilberforce's birthplace in Hull was opened to the public in 1906 and is thought to be the oldest anti-slavery museum in the world.

Among Wilberforce's colleagues in the slave trade campaign was the Bristol-born writer and educationalist Hannah More, a fellow-member of the Clapham Sect. Another member of the sect was the Scotsman Zachary Macaulay, one of the most dynamic abolitionist leaders. Those from Liverpool who were active in the movement included William Roscoe MP, the Quaker merchant James Cropper and the surgeon James Currie.

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Slavery has existed since ancient times and continues in the modern world. A slave was defined by the United Nations in 1927 as someone 'over whom any or all of the powers attached to the right of ownership are exercised'.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade, in which European states forcibly transported millions of African captives to the colonies, began in earnest in the early seventeenth century and lasted nearly 200 years. It was a systemised and brutal form of slavery on a scale not seen before or since and was based upon a new form of racist ideology that championed white supremacy.

This was a triangular trade of three stages, each of which offered the possibility of a full cargo and a profit. During the first leg, European manufactured goods, including guns, pots and pans, cloth, beads and nails, were shipped to Africa and exchanged at coastal trading posts for slaves, many of whom had been captured during inter-tribal wars. On the second leg, known as the Middle Passage, the slaves were carried in cramped and unsanitary ships across the



Portrait of a slave by an unknown artist, c 1800 (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull City Council).

Atlantic Ocean to North and South America and the Caribbean, where they were sold. For the final leg, the plantation goods of sugar, cotton, coffee, tobacco, cocoa and rum that were dependent on slave labour were loaded on the ships and sent to Europe to be sold.

A round trip from a British slaving port such as Bristol or Liverpool to Africa, the colonies and home again would take about a year to complete. Most ships left Britain between July and September to avoid the treacherous rainy season off the African coast when



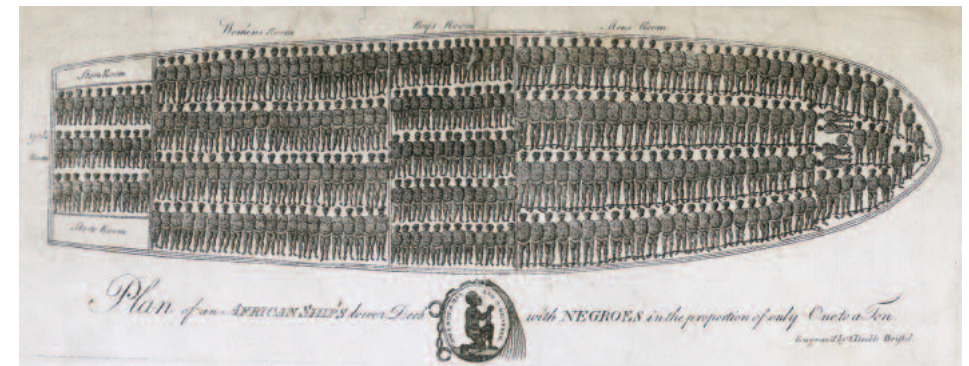
Map of the slave trade routes (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).

many British sailors came down with fever. They would aim to reach the Caribbean by the end of April the following year at sugar-making time.

Many profited from this lucrative trade, which contributed to Britain becoming one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nations. However, on 25 March 1807 the Slave Trade Abolition Bill was passed and although slavery would officially continue in the colonies until 1834, from this point in time no enslaved people could be traded in British ships or by British merchants.

The ending of the British slave trade was dependent upon a number of factors.

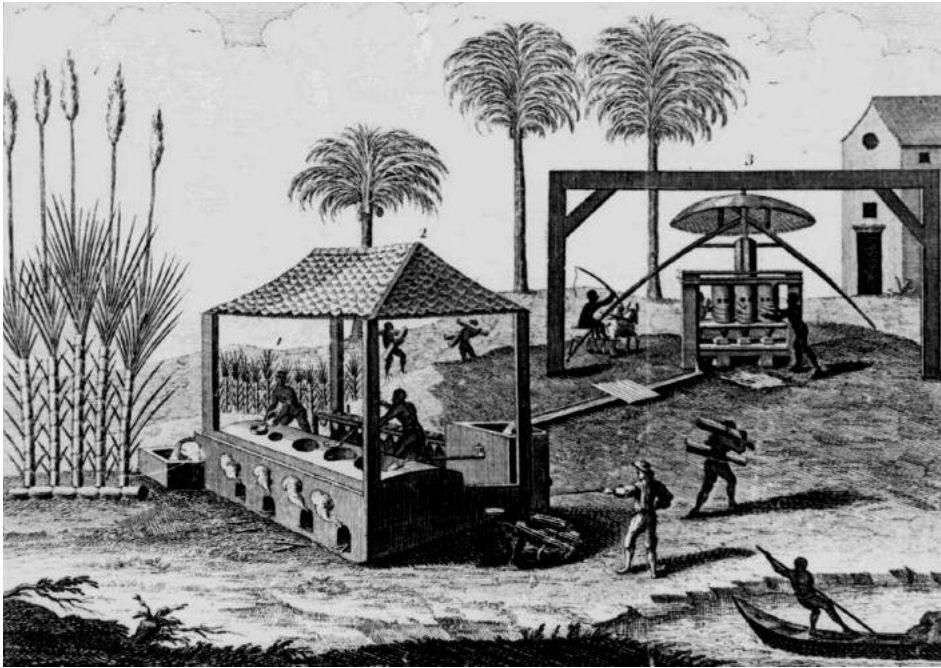
Plan depicting how slaves were loaded on board the Liverpool-registered slave ship, Brookes (Bristol Record Office).



High among these was the work of dedicated campaigners such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, who challenged slave traders in the courts, in Parliament, at public meetings, in the press and from the pulpit. They were joined by a grass-roots movement of thousands of people from all walks of life, black and white, appalled by reports of the callous treatment of the slaves.

Evidence of this cruelty was gathered from those with first-hand experience of the trade, including Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, and John Newton, writer of 'Amazing Grace' and a former captain of a slave ship. Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, a campaigner who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1770 at the age of 13, wrote in 1787:

Is it not strange to think, that they who ought to be considered as the most learned and civilised people in the world, that they should carry on a traffic of the most barbarous cruelty and injustice, and that many... are become so dissolute as to think slavery, robbery and murder no crime?

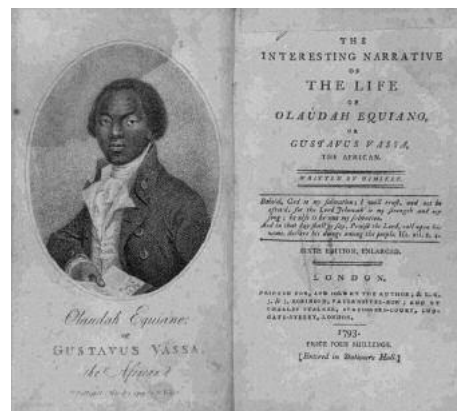


*Eighteenth-century print depicting Caribbean sugar cane and the art of making sugar (Bristol Record Office).*

Other factors leading to the abolition of the trade included the disruption caused by slave rebellions on the plantations, and the realisation by British merchants that it was cheaper to buy sugar from sources other than their own colonies.

When slavery was abolished, compensation was paid to plantation owners at the rate of £20 per enslaved person freed. No compensation was paid to the ex-slaves themselves, most of whom had little choice but to remain working for a pittance for their former masters. In the British Caribbean it was their descendants, hoping for a better way of life, who joined the mass post-war migration to Britain described so evocatively by Andrea Levy in *Small Island*.

In an article in the *Guardian* in 2000 entitled 'This is My England', Andrea Levy wrote:



*Frontispiece from Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, 1789 (National Museums Liverpool).*

There is a tendency to believe that the recent immigration into this country, started by my intrepid dad and others, was where our relationship began. But nothing could be further from the truth. There was an excellent programme on Channel 4 recently about Britain's slave trade, which showed the extent to which many of England's aristocratic families gained their wealth through slavery. Cities such as Bristol and Liverpool were built with the money from the slave trade. What the programme also showed was that not only do black people have ancestors who are white, but also some ordinary British white people are connected by family ties to the black people of the Caribbean or to the estimated 20,000 black people who settled in Britain as a result of the trade. The history of Britain is inextricably linked with that trade, and therefore with somewhere like Jamaica. Indeed, without the trade in slaves Jamaica as we know it would not exist.

It is this connection that will be explored in *Small Island Read 2007*.



*Slave drivers beating slaves, an illustration from the book Brésil, Colombie et Guyane published 1837.*



*One side of a commemorative medallion, celebrating the abolition of the slave trade, 1807. The medallion reads "I have heard their cry. Slave trade abolished 1807" (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).*



*A commemorative token depicting the 'Am I Not A Man' abolitionist logo (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).*



## Glasgow and Slavery

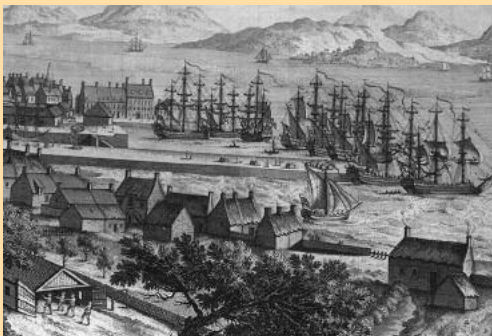
Only a handful of slaving ships left Glasgow for Africa and the colonies, but trading in tobacco, which was dependent on slave labour, brought prosperity to the city. In the 1770s Glasgow controlled over half of Britain's tobacco trade and the Glasgow tobacco lords made a fortune both re-exporting tobacco to overseas markets and handling domestic demand. Their wealth was invested in local industry and land, and many of the grand townhouses they built themselves can still be seen around the city. Caribbean sugar was another commodity integral to the commercial development of Glasgow and sugar refining was a major industry in nearby Greenock.

People connected to Glasgow also held property in the colonies. The Stirling family, who had estates in the north of the city, first developed interests in Jamaica in the eighteenth century. The then head of the family, Sir James Stirling, had 22 children and many of these were forced to emigrate to the colonies as he was unable to support them at home. Several went to Jamaica as merchants and planters. Their Jamaican estates, which produced sugar and rum, were worked by slave labour. The combination of a difficult working environment and disruption caused by slave uprisings meant the estates were never as profitable as the Stirlings had originally expected and they were sold following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies. Glaswegians had been active in the abolitionist campaign and the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1822.

During the American Civil War it was thanks to the great efforts of Glasgow Ladies Emancipation Societies and the black community that Confederate agents arms-dealing with Glasgow business men were exposed. One notable achievement was stopping a giant armoured ram from leaving the Clyde and being used by the Confederate forces. Slavery was officially abolished in the US with the Thirteenth Amendment, passed on 1 January 1865 and ratified on 6 December that year.



*(Top) Sketch of the house owned by the Stirlings on the Hampden plantation in Jamaica (Glasgow Libraries).*

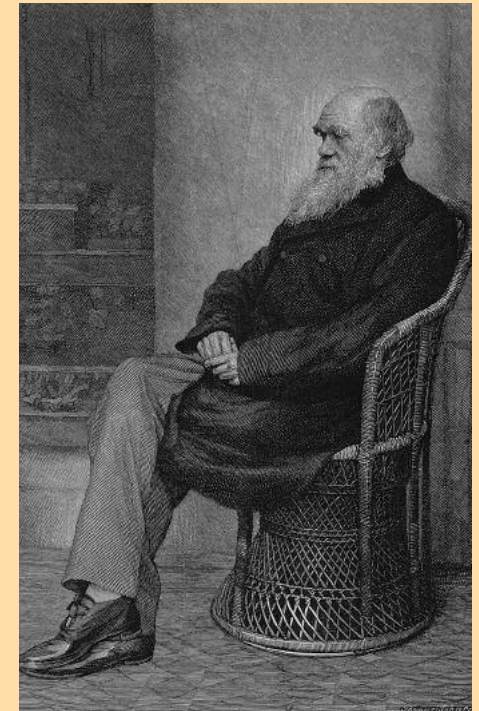


*(Left) Tobacco ships at Port Glasgow in the mid-1760s. Tobacco was transferred here to smaller vessels and taken on to Glasgow's main port, Broomielaw (Glasgow Libraries).*

## Darwin and Slavery

Charles Darwin, the naturalist and author, was among many nineteenth-century figures opposed to slavery. Darwin had witnessed first-hand the cruelties inflicted on enslaved people during his visits to the Spanish and Portuguese territories of South America during his famous voyage on board the *Beagle* (1831-1836). He wrote later: 'It makes one's blood boil, yet heart tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendants, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty.'

Darwin was descended from the Wedgwood family who were among the earliest campaigners against the slave trade. His grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was a member of the Lunar Society of scientists and intellectuals, all of whom were opposed to slave ownership. Darwin was also strongly influenced by Bristol-linked writers and religious dissenters who spoke out against slavery, including the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.



*Charles Darwin (University of Bristol).*

Most people of this period considered humans to have been created separate and superior to animals. Some extended this reasoning to say that the white race was separate and superior to the black. By their reckoning, slavery was justified because black people had been put on earth by God to serve white people in the same way as animals had been put on earth to serve human beings. In his work, Darwin argued that every creature on the planet was descended from the same original species and that the evolution of different races had come about as the result of human choices determined by the local environment rather than by some divine plan.

# Jamaica Timeline

The following timeline highlights key dates in the history of Jamaica from its first sighting by Christopher Columbus to independence.



- 1494** Christopher Columbus sights Jamaica.
- 1509** Jamaica occupied by the Spaniards. Most of the indigenous Arawak population soon die from European diseases. Replaced by enslaved Africans brought in to work on the plantations.
- 1655** Jamaica is captured by the British. Many of the existing slaves escape to form self-sufficient communities of maroons. New enslaved people are brought in from Africa by the British along with indentured white labourers.
- 1670** Jamaica formally ceded to the British under the terms of the Treaty of Madrid.
- 1692** Jamaican capital Port Royal sinks into the sea during an earthquake. Spanish Town becomes the new capital.
- 1807** Slave trade abolished.
- 1832** Baptist Wars led by Sam Sharpe.
- 1834** Slavery abolished but replaced by enforced apprenticeships.
- 1838** Apprenticeships abolished.
- 1845** Britain starts transporting indentured East Indian labourers to work on the plantations.
- 1865** The Governor and his troops ruthlessly put down the Morant Bay Rebellion and the local legislature is forced to surrender its powers.
- 1870** Banana plantations established as the sugar cane industry declines.
- 1884** New constitution marks initial return to local autonomy following Morant Bay Rebellion.
- 1938** Riots sparked by unemployment and resentment against British racial policies. Norman Manley founds the People's National Party.
- 1944** Universal adult suffrage introduced. New constitution provides for a House of Representatives elected by the people.
- 1948** *ss Empire Windrush* leaves for Britain carrying 492 Jamaicans.
- 1958** Jamaica becomes a member of the British-sponsored Federation of the West Indies.
- 1961** Jamaica withdraws from the Federation of the West Indies.
- 1962** Jamaica becomes independent within the British Commonwealth. Alexander Bustamante of the Jamaica Labour Party is prime minister.



(Above) Eighteenth-century map of Jamaica (Glasgow Libraries).  
 (Top) The English Valley in the Blue Mountains, Jamaica from The English in the West Indies by James Anthony Froude, 1888 (Bristol Libraries).

# The Jamaican Maroons

Rebellions by slaves and maroons across Jamaica and the other colonies hastened the end of slavery. The name 'maroon' refers to escaped slaves and their descendants, and is derived from the Spanish word 'cimarron', which means wild or untamed. When the British invaded Jamaica in 1655, the enslaved Africans owned by the Spanish colonists escaped into the hills and, in time, these maroons came to control large areas of the interior.



Among Jamaica's national heroes is Queen Nanny of the Maroons. Biographical information on Nanny is scarce and contradictory, but she is thought to have been a royal member of the Ashanti tribe who had been brought from Africa as a slave in the early eighteenth century. She and her five brothers escaped from their plantation soon after their arrival and Nanny went on to lead the main group of maroons based in the east of the island, known as the Windward Maroons. She guided her followers in an intense period of resistance against the British, burning estates, carrying away arms and food, and setting slaves free. As well as a military strategist, Nanny was a nurse and a spiritual leader, and it is claimed she had supernatural powers. Nanny, who was officially declared a national hero in 1976, is credited with uniting the maroons across Jamaica and playing a major role in the preservation of African culture and knowledge.

Leonard Parkinson, Captain of the Maroons by H Smith (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives). Parkinson was one of the leaders of the Jamaican maroons, who maintained their freedom and independence against British troops for 100 years.

# The Windrush Generation

There has been a black presence in Britain for thousands of years. Black people originally came to the country as merchant seamen, servants, slaves, stokers, labourers, artists, students and entertainers, and as sailors, soldiers and airmen during the two World Wars. Many stayed on and black communities developed in isolated pockets in cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool and London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Waiting to disembark at Tilbury Docks, 1948 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).



A Musical Club, 1808, artist unknown (© The Royal Institution of Cornwall: PEemi001). The black musician depicted here is thought to be the composer Joseph Emidy who lived in Falmouth and was a former slave. He was born in Guinea, West Africa in 1775. He died in 1835 and is buried in Truro.

The 1948 Nationality Act marked the beginning of a new era in black immigration as it stated that every Commonwealth citizen was also a British subject and, therefore, guaranteed the right of entry to the United Kingdom. An 'open door' immigration policy remained until 1962 when the Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced a quota system and restricted admission to those holding employment vouchers. During the early post-war period, the number of immigrants arriving from the Caribbean each year was in the low hundreds and this did not increase significantly until the mid-1950s when the McCarren-Walter Act limited immigration to the USA, the preferred destination for many.

In June 1948 the British troopship *ss Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks in Kent carrying 492 civilian passengers from Jamaica, including Andrea Levy's father. Many of these Jamaicans were young men who had served with the Allied Forces in Europe during the war and were keen to return, having had a glimpse of the opportunities Britain could offer.

Few expected to remain in Britain for longer than five years, but in the event most stayed on and settled here and were later joined by their wives and families. In *Small Island*, Hortense joins Gilbert a few months after his arrival, expecting him to have sorted out suitable accommodation that will be in keeping with her lofty expectations of the British way of life. She is shocked by the squalor of the attic room he is renting in Queenie's house, failing to appreciate that this is the best he is able to provide in difficult circumstances. In his frustration Gilbert tells her:

**This room is where you will sleep, eat, cook, dress, and write your mummy to tell her how the Mother Country is so fine. And, little Miss High-class, one thing about England you don't know yet because you just come off a boat. You are lucky.**

Author Mike Phillips has written that the early migrants' mood 'veered between regret and expectation, but largely, attitudes were hopeful and optimistic'. Phillips continues:

Caribbean migration to Britain was simply the logical conclusion of Caribbean history and Caribbean life up to the midpoint of the 20th century. The historical, economic, social, cultural and linguistic relationship with Britain had created and shaped the region. The hopeless economic conditions of the islands pushed its people outwards rather than holding them in place, and for a group of nations, which had been called into existence by Britain, migration to Britain was, in a sense, like coming home.

*Small Island's* Gilbert had already experienced British life during the war and was aware that the Mother Country was not the paradise the people in the colonies had been led to believe. The food was bland, the skies grey, the people dreary, he was stared at in the street and called abusive names, and although he had been taught everything there was to know about Britain in school, no one here even knew where Jamaica was or



showed any interest in finding out about it. Having unquestioningly answered the call to defend her, he describes his shock at first seeing the shabbiness of the Mother Country:

The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?'

He is also soon to learn on his return in 1948 that his RAF uniform and the wartime spirit had previously shielded him from the worst excesses of British racism. Yet despite the bleakness of the present situation, he is unable to leave as there is nothing to go back to, even if he could afford the fare. He remembers too well the disappointment of returning to Jamaica after the war:

... instead of being joyous at this demob I looked around me quizzical as a jilted lover. So, that was it. Now what? With alarm I became aware that the island of Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea. In that moment, standing tall on Kingston harbour, I was shocked by the awful realisation that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!

*(Left) The arrival of the Windrush at Tilbury Docks, Essex, 22 June 1948 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

*(Right) Young Jamaican boy looking after his family's luggage, September 1954 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*



# Black Americans in Bristol

In *Small Island*, Gilbert encounters blatant racism in the form of the segregation of American troops who came to Britain during World War Two. US troops first arrived in Bristol in August 1942. Many were based at Tyntesfield, a spectacular Victorian Gothic mansion in North Somerset, where the white and black soldiers were kept in separate quarters.

The local history book *West at War* includes first-hand accounts of the violence that occasionally broke out as a result of segregation. One reads:

There were many incidents of white GIs going down to the 'black' pubs like the *Spread Eagle* in Old Market Street, and starting a fight if they found white girls there. Once there was a group of white paratroopers who literally hunted in packs, looking for black men to beat up and it turned into a riot. I was with two friends and we stood in the cinema doorway in Old Market and watched it happen, as they fought along Old Market and into West Street. Everyone says it didn't happen and no records exist, but it did, it was hushed up.

On 15 July 1944 a brawl involving over 400 GIs and 120 military police led to several serious injuries and at least one death. It broke out when a group of white Americans, many of whom came from the American South, objected to black men gathering socially in Park Street and Great George Street, a 'white' area of Bristol. Locals were largely sympathetic to the black troops and one Bristol woman was fined for assaulting a military policeman who she saw hitting a black GI during the fight. The city remained under military curfew for some days afterwards.



First Lady, Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, shown with honour guard of black GIs during visit to Bristol in 1943 (Bristol Record Office).

# Settling In

Between 1955 and 1962 it is estimated that a quarter of a million Caribbean people settled permanently in Britain. Some had had their passage subsidised by London Transport and the hospitals of the newly formed National Health Service which were experiencing staff shortages and needed to recruit overseas.

The majority remained in London but others moved to the industrial centres of Bristol, Liverpool, the Midlands, West Yorkshire and beyond. As a result of housing shortages and racial prejudice, most were forced to live in rundown districts, reliant on white landlords like Queenie in *Small Island* who could tolerate their colour but were not above exploiting them, or moving to areas where other Caribbean people had already made their homes such as Notting Hill in London.

Black people were generally excluded from high-paid, high-skilled jobs, irrespective of their qualifications, and from industries that were heavily unionised. Work was found instead as porters, cleaners, transport workers, labourers, factory hands, within the General Post Office and, later, in businesses of their own. In *Small Island*, Gilbert has had to give up his ambition to study law and take the only acceptable work offered to him – truck driving. In an interview, Andrea Levy has said that:

*West Indians arriving at British railway station, 21 June 1959 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

... the big thing that happened with [Gilbert and Hortense] is that they changed class immediately. So they came from having a middle class sensibility about what life could offer them, to the limitations of being very poor in a poor country. It was struggling then to build itself back up, and finding yourself as the lowest of the low.





Queenie's neighbour, Mr Todd, is typical of the small-mindedness of some white people of the time. He sees the new post-war immigrants as an alien invasion come to take advantage of the generosity of the British National Health Service, the men a threat to any decent white woman. During the war he and his kind held similar views on the Poles, the Czechs, the Belgians, the Jews and the East End cockneys. While not playing down her anger at the injustices experienced at this time, by having black and white narrators in *Small Island* Andrea Levy shows that there were problems to be faced, adjustments to be made and misunderstandings to clear up on both sides as everyone's life was changed by immigration. She also shows that as well as cruelty, ignorance, humiliation and despair, there were extraordinary acts of generosity and inspirational shows of strength.

Despite the difficulties, most of the newcomers had begun to make the transition from being a migrant labour force to an established community within a few years of arrival. They accepted, adapted and challenged aspects of the British way of life, as they felt appropriate, and retained a sense of Caribbean identity through festivals and celebrations, the church, music, family, dress and food. Although all shared common roots and a lifetime exposure to British colonial culture, each of the islands and mainland territories had their own traditions and histories, and in establishing new communities in Britain compatriots tended to stick together, Jamaicans keeping close to Jamaicans, Guyanese to other Guyanese, and so on. In *Small Island* and her earlier novels, Andrea Levy is interested in the duality that comes from looking back to the



(Above) A Jamaican family planning to emigrate to England, 2 August 1962 (*Science and Society/ NMPFT Daily Herald Archive*).

(Left) Girl asleep in her father's arms, Victoria Station, London, 1962 (*Science and Society/ NMPFT Daily Herald Archive*).

past and the old country, and forward to the future and the new, and in the sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary notions of what is meant by 'home' and 'identity' that result from this.

One source of potential conflict and confusion for those attempting to settle in Britain was education, once a bedrock of Caribbean aspirations. Caribbean children had largely been taught in small, well-disciplined schools with lessons based on the British system of education. Having English as their first language and a familiarity with the British curriculum, the children should have settled in well on arrival in Britain. However, the large, impersonal inner-city schools were daunting and the unfamiliar Caribbean dialects led teachers to assume the children were ignorant or lazy because they spoke 'bad English'. As a result of this misunderstanding, a disproportionate number of black Caribbean children were classified as 'educationally subnormal'.



Fireman on the 'Neil Gow' steam locomotive, 17 May 1962. *Science and Society*(Colin T Gifford).

Near the climax of *Small Island*, Gilbert gives an impassioned speech to the hostile Bernard about their common bonds as ex-servicemen. Hortense, who previously despaired of what she considered Gilbert's coarse manners and his 'rough Jamaican way' of talking, is impressed. In her narration she says:

**Gilbert had hushed the room. It was not only Mr Bligh whose mouth gaped in wonder... For at that moment Gilbert stood, his chest panting with the passion from his words, I realised that Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend. 'Gilbert Joseph,' everyone would shout. 'Have you heard about Gilbert Joseph?'**

She is soon to be disillusioned as Mr Bligh says softly: 'I'm sorry... but I just can't understand a single word that you're saying.'

Hortense herself, with her overly formal language and exaggerated 'received English', is similarly adrift among the British. She is disgusted by the white working-class speech but is disconcerted when she constantly has to repeat herself in order to be understood – she who was 'top of the class in Miss Stuart's English pronunciation competition' and whose recitation of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' earned her 'the honour of ringing the school bell for one week'. Failure to communicate, either because of differences in language and background or because the characters are unable to articulate their true feelings, is a theme which runs through *Small Island*, providing a source of humour but also of sadness.

## The Black Community in Liverpool

Liverpool's black community includes families who can trace their existence in the city across several generations. Nineteenth-century parish records show the registration of a number of 'native' baptisms, mainly adult men. Several of these had originated from America and may have been former slaves who had fought alongside the British in the War of Independence in exchange for their freedom.

The children of West African chiefs who traded with Liverpool merchants were occasionally educated in the city and some stayed on after they had completed their studies. Liverpool shipping companies engaged West African seamen and wealthy families often employed black servants, some of whom would have originally been brought to Britain as slaves.

By 1911 Liverpool had a black population of 3,000 (the total population of the city was 750,000). Despite most being British-born, they continued to be looked upon as alien and as a problem by the rest of the city. Anti-black riots broke out in Liverpool in 1919 and again in 1948, in part as the result of tension about competition for jobs in the post-World War periods. Community responses to this hostility included the forming of a local branch of the League of Coloured People in the 1930s, the establishment of Stanley House in 1946 as a centre for social and political events and the founding of the Colonial People's Defence Association in the 1950s.



Mr Priddie and Violet from the Caribbean Reading Group in Liverpool with copies of *Small Island* (Liverpool Reads).

# Resources

Andrea Levy has written the following novels:

*Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994)

*Never Far From Nowhere* (1996)

*Fruit of the Lemon* (1999)

*Small Island* (2004)

All are published by Headline Review and should be available to borrow from your local library. She has also written short stories, which have been published in the *Mail on Sunday*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Sunday Express* and the compilation *New Writing 7*.

*Small Island* has been translated into several languages and is available in large print and audio formats. It has been dramatised as a Radio 4 serial.

There is a link to Andrea Levy's website from the *Small Island Read 2007* website at [www.smallislandread.com](http://www.smallislandread.com).

The *Small Island Read 2007* website also includes bibliographies of books on slavery and migration, suggestions for other novels to read which describe the Caribbean experience of arriving in Britain and links to relevant websites.



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"Is it not strange to think, that they who ought to be considered as the most learned and civilised people in the world, that they should carry on a traffic of the most barbarous cruelty and injustice, and that many... are become so dissolute as to think slavery, robbery and murder no crime?"

