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Cynthia Cockburn. *Looking to London: Stories of War, Escape and Asylum.* London: Pluto Press, 2017. 240 pp. $99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7453-9922-5.

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Spaces of Belonging

Looking to London: Stories of War, Escape and Asylum is the last book published by prolific author Cynthia Cockburn (1934-2019). She was not a university graduate and yet she wrote, coauthored, and edited eighteen books. Her work has been translated into a dozen languages and used in university courses. She held an honorary degree from the Swedish University of Lund and academic appointments as a visiting chair in the Department of Sociology at City University London and an honorary chair in the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick. Her blog, *Notowar*, contains more than two dozen talks and blog posts.[1] She was among the early feminist writers who brought gender into academic discourse. Cockburn's scholarship aligned with her personal principals of justice, equality, peace, and care for others.[2]

Looking to London is a transnational examination of war, migration, and re-homing. Cockburn begins the book with a discussion of London's long history of attracting migrants—both national and international—and its early racially motivated border controls. She describes her own journey of migration to London as a labor migrant in search of a better life. With her own successful migration as background, and as a long-time peace activist, she credits increased awareness of war-traumatized asylum seekers and refugees in her community as inspiration for the book. From 2014 to 2017, Cockburn, using a methodology she terms "engaged documentary," researched London's immigration policies and Borough Council records and undertook ethnographic research to explore the migration experiences of Kurdish, Somali, Tamil, Sudanese, and Syrian refugees who made their way from war-torn homelands to London where they resettled among ethnic communities in five of London's thirty-three boroughs (see figure 1).[3]

Following an overview of London's migration history, the subsequent five chapters, each similarly structured, provide historical backgrounds and sociopolitical analyses of the migrants and the nations from which they fled and details on the rehoming efforts of borough councils as they navigated the challenges of cohesively integrating growing numbers of diverse war-traumatized populations. The mixed-methods approach used by Cockburn reveals the impact of wars on people's lives; demonstrates the horrors of experiencing one's life being ripped apart by armed conflict; and points to the anxieties, frustrations, and risks people face in migration. Perhaps more important, she particularizes the struggles of local communities as they attempt to meet the needs of burgeoning migrant refugee and asylum-seeking populations amid declining resources. She argues that austerity policies and terrorist threats created conditions for frequently changing immigration legislation and, in some cases, less than welcoming environments for migrants. Each chapter highlights the experiences of women who escaped the violence, oppression, and injustices of war and includes robust ethnographic descriptions of different generations of migrant women and their efforts to resettle and develop communities in London's boroughs.

In chapter 2, "From South-East Turkey to North-East London: Kurds in Hackney," Cockburn argues that Kurds residing within the borders of four nation-states—Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq—have longed for a modern Kurdish identity since the First World War. This quickly evolved into a desire for Kurdish unity and nationhood. Following the war, Britain, France, and Italy carved up the Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Sévres (1920), which provided for significant protections and local autonomy for Kurdish areas. However, three years later European powers approved the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which recognized the new Republic of Turkey and denied minority rights to Kurds. Turkish nationalism was enforced in the new republic. Cockburn chronicles an ongoing history of repression against the Kurds who continued to push for autonomy; the discussion includes the efforts of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to create an independent nation-state of Kurdistan. Those seeking to understand the current violence against the Kurds would benefit from reading this chapter. Since the 1980s, London has resettled significant numbers of Kurds. An extensive network of organizations has grown up to support the Kurdish diaspora. Cockburn discusses the work of Roj women who formed an association in 2004 to help meet the needs of women. They provide a meeting space, language courses, and skill-building sessions geared toward women's employment. They offer support services to women suffering domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence. They also maintain close connections to, and attempt to fight for the human rights of, women in Kurdish regions of Turkey.

In chapter 3, "From the Horn of Africa to the Isle of Dogs: Somalis in Tower Hamlets," Cockburn explores the struggles of Somali migrants. Faced with war, starvation, and a life-expectancy rate under fifty years, many traveled from the Horn of Africa to settle in Tower Hamlets. Cockburn's brief overviews of colonialism and its contributions to today's Somali conflicts and her discussion of the position of women in Somali society are enlightening and help explain the problems that some Somalis faced in resettlement in London. The key years for Somali mass immigration to London were from the late 1980s to 1999 when this population comprised 11 percent of incoming refugees to Britain. The number of asylum applications peaked at 6,455 per year in 1999; afterward applications lessened but stayed above 5,000 a year until 2004 and dropped to 373 by 2015. She notes a significant contrast to Kurds who arrived during the same period. Kurdish migrants were generally more cohesive as a people; the Somali migrants, many who were fleeing ethnic violence, significantly remained clan-based in London. This created limited and fragmented community-based organizations and made resettlement more difficult. In Tower Hamlets, the Somalis were primarily from the Isaaq Clan and created a Somali Organizations Network to foster management of Somali associations, encourage networking, and serve as a voice for the groups outside Tower Hamlets. She notes that Somali women have one of the lowest levels of employment in the United Kingdom with many living in poverty, suffering from depression, and isolated at home with limited English-language skills. Yet, beyond this typical characterization, there are also successful entrepreneurs, academics, and award-winning writers. Cockburn argues that for some women, the experience of war, displacement, and migration has provided an opportunity for them to move beyond gender-based Somali traditions and increase their independence.

Chapter 4, "Home for Whom? Tamils in Hounslow and Home Office Detention," describes Tamil refugees forced from Sri Lanka who survive in Hounslow. From 1983 to 2009, Sri Lanka experienced a civil war between the majority Sinhala Buddhists and the minority Hindu Tamil population. Cockburn provides a brief overview of shifting colonialisms and their impact on the island and its people. British colonial rule lasted from 1815 to 1948, and as in many postcolonial nations, violence erupted as resentments flared between people previously supported and favored by the colonial government and other groups who had suffered in the past. At independence, the Sinhalese Buddhist majority gained control of the government and within a few years began to deny rights to the Tamil population. By the 1970s, a strong Tamil resistance movement had formed, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or the Tamil Tigers). Despite support of the war from a large and relatively successful Tamil diaspora, which provided millions of dollars toward the effort, the independence war was lost. The Sri Lankan government brutally quashed Tamil resistance fighters. As Tamil refugees fled, they looked to the capital of the former colonial power, London, as a place to re-home. However, this generation of migrants was unwelcomed by the British government and earlier Sri Lankan migrants. They were considered too radical, too poor, and undereducated. Cockburn notes that, according to the Home Office from 1994 to 1997, the initial years of the civil war, almost 7,590 applications for asylum were submitted by Sri Lankans; a mere 90 were given secure refugee status and 6,005 were denied entry. Britain turned its back on these migrants; well into the twenty-first century few are given "leave to remain" (p. 107). Many were forced into illegal migration and deportations soared. Many deportees were tortured on their return to Sri Lanka. Criticism and protests to the detention and deportation of Sri Lankan migrants grew but did not affect outcomes.

Amid the unwelcome atmosphere, a Tamil community took root in Hounslow, and the Tamil Community Centre was started by Thavarani Nagulendram (Rani). Due to a lack of trust in authorities, she has never sought funds from the Hounslow Council. She started the center as a gathering place to help her father-in-law, and it blossomed into a space where thousands come for Tamil cultural activities and help with problems that range from poor health to domestic violence. Rani volunteers her time to operate the organization. A disturbing yet interesting section of this chapter is "Hardly Home: Tamil Women in Detention." Cockburn discusses Britain's immigration policy in relation to detaining immigrants. The practice was introduced in the Immigration Act of 1971 but gained little traction until 2007 when the "New Asylum Model (NAM)" was introduced (p. 120). A key provision in NAM is Detained Fast-Tracked (DFT) to keep asylum seekers in custody until their cases are determined. Since 2001, Tamil women, including Rani, have been housed at Yarl Wood Detention Facility pending determinations on their status. Women's poignant immigration stories demonstrate the inhumane nature of subjecting war-traumatized asylum seekers to detention. Cockburn also argues that it is a waste of tax payers' money at 130 pounds per woman per day (approximately 168 dollars), since two-thirds of women are released into British society.

In chapter 5, "The Sudans' Divided People Come to Camden," Cockburn addresses both North and South Sudan. She recounts the tortured history of the Sudanese forcibly displaced by years of civil war and notes that the Sudanese in London who came to re-home in Camden are "refugees from wars that were fought both before and after the separation, and within and across the states' common border" (p. 134). It is indisputable that the ending of colonialism gave rise to ethnic and religious conflicts that have essentially lasted for more than sixty years. Cockburn details the political conflicts that left two and a half million people dead and more than four million people displaced. She suggests that cultural adaptations necessitated by war have placed more responsibility on women and led to their increased confidence and leadership roles. She also makes visible the brutal violence perpetrated against women, as well as men and boys, during the wars. In 2006 and 2007, the Fragile States Index—developed by the US-based think tank Fund for Peace—listed Sudan as the most fragile state out of the 178 nations.[4] Conditions since then have improved slightly and in 2019 the country ranked eighth.

The Sudanese in London's Camden Borough have a community center run by the South Sudan Women's Skills Development Group (SSWSDG). The organization has received grants of support from the Camden Council and other organizations. The funding allows for a permanent office and the development of community-based programs to tutor English, math, and science for school-aged children; English-language courses for adults as well as vernacular-language courses; and a host of other arts and cultural programming. The Sudan Women's Group in London, created by women from North Sudan, supports migrants learning balance between their culture of origin and culture of rehoming. Cockburn discusses the Camden Council's successful partnering approach to community cohesion and integration. She notes that there are "2,500 voluntary organizations in Camden and a highly engaged population" (p. 155).

Cockburn was writing the final chapter, "Syrian War, Migration Crisis and 'Refugees Welcome' in Lambeth," as a "'migration crisis' bigger than any experienced since the Second World War" was unfolding and daily newspapers were filled with tragic stories of migrants killed attempting to reach Europe (p. 167). A total of 22 percent of these migrants hailed from Syria; they were displaced by an ongoing civil war that began as part of the Arab Spring in 2011. She explores the origins and trajectory of the popular uprising, the government's repression of people seeking freedom, and the response of the international community. Cockburn provides a rich history detailing, as with the Kurdish situation, the impact of European imperialism on Syria following the First World War. She notes that in the middle of the war, French and British representatives met secretly and signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement that carved out their postwar territories. This agreement was ratified in the Treaty of Sèvres and refined in the Treaty of Lausanne. This chapter, like chapter 2, offers readers insight into the persistent repression of people struggling for freedom. In 2019, Syria is ranked number four globally for fragile states resulting in massive numbers of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide.[5]

The UK's government responded with silence to the Syrian refugee crisis; it refused to acknowledge any problem. Prime Minister David Cameron won election in 2010 by "pledging ('no ifs, no buts') to reduce immigration" (p. 181). However, the problem grew more monumental and presented itself at London's door. Thousands of Middle Eastern and African migrants warehoused in a refugee camp in Calais, France, attempted to make their way to London via the Channel Tunnel. As conditions in the camp, which came to be called "The Jungle," became known, public support from Britain grew and caravans conveying food, clothing, and building supplies were organized to provide some comfort and dignity to the people stuck in the camp. These efforts are described in Kate Evans's wonderful graphic novel, ***Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*** (2017), in which she details a helpless and battered population living in horrendous conditions amid a growing anti-immigrant sentiment in France. The Refugees Welcome Project and the Safe Passage Project encouraged the British government to re-home refugees in Britain.

Cockburn explains the extraordinary efforts of the people in London's Lambeth Borough to welcome Syrian refugees. She details how people came together and decided to make a difference. It started by countering ugly and inhumane anti-immigrant narratives and instead constructing portrayals of making moral choices to support those in need. A small group started with symbolic acts of support and meetings with local politicians who refused to help, but activists kept working. They gathered strength in partnerships and multiple faith-based and educational communities who came together. Eventually, when the community itself had gathered sufficient resources to support incoming refugees, the Lambeth Council was willing to accept them. The first family arrived in 2016, ten more in 2017 as the book was finished, with more expected. Cockburn shows that success in Lambeth came from three initiatives: collaboration among faith-based communities using a secular framework designed by Citizens UK, mobilization of schools and students who wanted to help others, and sustained partnerships between civil and political organizations. Put differently, people with a will to help created the conditions under which they could work together to make a difference and welcome Syrian refugees into their community.

Cockburn's book is highly readable, refreshing in its spirit of hope and detailed in its delivery of the geopolitical and historical contexts of the five migrant populations covered in the book. Each chapter contains a wealth of information on the successive waves of migrations to London and records official British government policy responses to the evermore desperate—and needy—migrant populations. Her analysis shows how growing austerity measures and increasingly restrictive immigration policies make settlement difficult for migrants and the borough councils trying to rehome them. Each chapter also highlights the agency of migrants as it recounts both their harrowing stories of migration and their active efforts to construct new lives, develop communities, and offer support to the communities they left behind. Her focus on women's migration experiences reveals unfathomable horrors driving migration. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the strength and resiliency of women. The multidimensionality of this book, the broad scope of coverage, and the ability to read individual chapters that focus on one migrant group make this an eminently useful text. What comes out so poignantly in the book is that while some forcibly displaced individuals have access to resources and networks of kin and friends who can help, most are suddenly disconnected from their livelihoods, as their homes are destroyed or abandoned and their means of support compromised. They need not only shelter, clothing, and food but also mental health resources and skills training when they are rehomed. The book calls for compassion and understanding for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers pushed out of their homes by war and pulled to London in search of a space to belong and a place to live in peace with dignity. It is a call and an example of social solidarity at local and international levels.

Figure 1: Five London Boroughs. The above figure does not appear, it can be viewed at https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/fivelondonboroughs.png.

Notes

[1]. Ann Oakley, "Remembering Cynthia Cockburn," Pluto Press, 2019, accessed October 30, 2019, https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/remembering-cynthia-cockburn/.

[2]. Cynthia Cockburn, "Current Work," ***Notowar*** (blog), February 12, 2019, https://www.cynthiacockburn.org/notowar/.

[3]. Map adapted from Russian Sphinx, "Tableau Mapping Template for London Boroughs," August 6, 2014, http://russiansphinx.blogspot.com/2014/08/tableau-mapping-template-for-london_6.html. Contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database

right [2012]” and “Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right [2012].

[4]. Fragile States Index, “Sudan,” Fund for Peace, accessed October 31, 2019, https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/.

[5]. Fragile States Index, “Syria,” Fund for Peace, accessed October 31, 2019, https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/.

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