

'Departures' at the Migration Museum, London

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'Departures: Four Hundred Years of Emigration from Britain', the Migration Museum, London, 19 May 2021 – 13 February 2022



'Departures' was an exhibition at the Migration Museum in London that explored four hundred years of emigration from Britain. The intended message of the exhibition was clear: by presenting personal stories of British emigration, the museum was seeking to normalise the movement of people more generally. This was made explicit, with the exhibition asking: 'Can exploring the motivations of those who have left help us better understand the often similar motivations of those who arrive?'

The exhibition, then, supported the Migration Museum's broader objectives to normalise the movement of people, celebrate the value of migration to Britain and encourage empathy towards migrants. In the context of the increasingly normalised hostility towards immigrants in the UK, this is vital work that deserves recognition and commendation, and the exhibition was

full of stories that are powerfully emotive and creatively exhibited, in a way that is typical of the museum's exciting exhibitionary style that privileges personal stories over material artefacts.

An exhibition of British emigration necessitates the inclusion of colonial histories. Indeed, as I explored the exhibition, I was struck by the prominence of histories of British colonialism. As such, in this review I focus on how the colonial past was represented in 'Departures' and consider what function these representations serve. In doing so, I pose several questions to the museum sector. Can colonisation be interpreted as emigration? What representations of the colonial past does this framing produce and how do they encourage us to engage with Britain's colonial past?

'Departures' first opened in October 2020 but closed within a few days due to a national lockdown; it was open to the public again between 19 May 2021 and 13 February 2022. The exhibition's design evoked an airport, with sections such as a 'Departures Lounge', 'Passport Control', 'Baggage Reclaim' and 'Departure Gates'. British colonialism was represented in several different ways across the exhibition. Personal experiences, shared attitudes and official policies all featured, covering a vast geographical and chronological range. Together, these diverse representations encouraged me to empathise with individual Britons who participated in the British Empire, while also condemning abstract colonial attitudes and policies. This seemed to reflect the museum's sincere and well-intentioned effort to include critiques of British colonialism within an exhibition that ultimately sought, however, to normalise, celebrate and empathise with the experiences of colonists as examples of emigration. Yet I felt uneasy about this as a mode of engaging with Britain's colonial past.

Empathising with British Colonists

Personal stories of emigration appeared across the exhibition. This is a powerful lens through which to engage with the past. The stories draw you into the lives of emigrants, who have a strong presence as familiar and relatable individuals. They prompt you to imagine the hardships that emigrants have endured and thus empathise with them. Many of these emigrants established or settled in various kinds of colonies. Through these personal stories, then, the exhibition encouraged visitors to empathise with the experiences of colonists in a way that is detached from the wider politics of empire.

This could be seen in a display about 'Y Wladfa', the Welsh colony in Patagonia in South America that was established in the nineteenth century. The hardships that the Welsh endured was emphasised; they were 'facing threats to the Welsh language and culture at home' from the English and endured a 'hard journey' to reach Patagonia. This included a three-month passage 'across the arid desert', during which time Mary Ann Thomas gave birth to a baby girl. Once they reached their destination, the 'early settlers were unprepared' for the 'barren and inhospitable' Patagonia. The inclusion of descendant voices constructed a feeling of intimacy.

Lila Tognetti describes her ancestor, T T Awstin, as loving singing and supposedly having ‘a beautiful voice’. She wonders whether her ancestors were ‘scared, brave, or just plain hopeless’. Through this, colonial history was presented as a highly personal and emotive family history.



Domestic photographs of Welsh settlers in Patagonia, in 'Departures' at the Migration Museum, London, 19 May – 13 February 2022, photo courtesy of the author

What function does empathy serve here? No doubt the museum was seeking to prompt visitors to understand migration as the movement of human beings who are worthy of our empathy. Yet by encouraging visitors to empathise with colonists, these personal stories also propagate a partial and sanitised understanding of colonialism. Photography plays an important role in encouraging these feelings of intimacy and empathy for individual colonists/emigrants. Domestic photographs, from formal family portraits to more informal scenes, dominated the Patagonia display. These speak to what Elizabeth Edwards terms the ‘visual landscape of the ordinary’ which is ‘captured in the everydayness of photographs’.¹ Photographs in colonial archives, Edwards argues, often have a ‘cosy normality’ and a ‘closeness, a sense of immediacy’.² The photographs in this display and elsewhere in the exhibition were both familial and familiar. As Edwards argues, they ‘disguise and complicate traces of colonial power’ so that ‘overt logics of the colonial’ are absent.³

However, over the course of my visit to the exhibition I gradually grew weary of these personal stories. The exhibition privileged the highly selective experiences and perspectives of

¹ Elizabeth Edwards, ‘The colonial archival imaginaire at home’, *Social Anthropology*, Volume 24, No 1, February 2016, p 62

² Ibid

³ Ibid

British colonists, but without interrogating them. Elizabeth Buettner has argued that the lens of personal stories has been used by Britons active in the British Empire as a ‘weapon against critics’.⁴ She states that these stories emphasise ‘hard work, sacrifices, lasting achievements and good relations with colonial subjects’ to combat ‘stereotypes that colonials lived easy lives of privilege as the beneficiaries of exploitative and racially unequal societies’.⁵ As Buettner argues, the exhibition’s personal stories risked reinforcing ‘the foundations of a resoundingly celebratory imperial eulogy’.⁶

Critiques of the Colonial Past

The exhibition included several critiques of distinct aspects of British colonialism. Displays established the parameters through which visitors were encouraged to critique the colonial past. A display titled ‘Books & Magazines’ made explicit the relationship between British colonialism and racism. Visitors were invited to read a series of ‘guidebooks from across the ages’ that were ‘written for travellers and people planning to emigrate’. Many of these contain overt and extensive racist language and imagery, and a text panel warned that they were ‘difficult and upsetting to read’ because of their ‘strongly imperialist and racist ideas’. Notably, this critique of colonialism as bound up in racism was separate from the personal stories of emigration. A distinction was made between racism as an abstract set of attitudes and the intimate and personal experiences of individuals.



Detail of the ‘Books & Magazines’ section of ‘Departures’ at the Migration Museum, London, 19 May – 13 February 2022, photo courtesy of the author

⁴ Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, pp 450–451

⁵ Ibid, p 450

⁶ Ibid, pp 450–451

This racism was also subtly presented as separate from us in the present. The text stated that the racism within the books reflected ‘the attitudes... *of the time*’ and that this was therefore ‘difficult and upsetting to read *today*’ (emphasis added). On reflection, this subtle distinction between past and present encouraged me, as a white Briton, to feel relatively comfortable encountering these books as historical forms of racism from which I was removed. Those who have experienced racism themselves may have responded to this display differently and perhaps found it challenging to encounter such explicit representations of racism.

Through this display, the exhibition did not seek to encourage visitors to consider contemporary forms of racism as a legacy of British colonialism. This was somewhat surprising, given the close relationship between British colonialism, historical racism and contemporary racist attitudes towards migrants. Elsewhere, the exhibition represented Britons as the victims of damaging British colonial policies. A distinction was established between vulnerable and innocent Britons and the cruel and impersonal policies that negatively impacted their lives. Again, these displays encouraged visitors to empathise with these Britons and to condemn colonial policies. By implication, then, colonialism is represented as a set of policies, perpetrated by impersonal institutions rather than by the British people themselves.



Detail of the 'Child Migrants' display in 'Departures' at the Migration Museum, London, 19 May – 13 February 2022, photo courtesy of the author

This distinction could be seen in a display about child migration schemes, whereby British children were forcibly deported to settler colonies between 1869 and 1967. A clear narrative of victims and perpetrators was established. The youthful age of those who were deported was emphasised, evoking their innocence and thus their status as victims. Painted onto the wall in a naïve style were a stick figure and a ship, as if a child had painted them. A quotation read ‘That first night I cried for mum, for England and everyone back there’, and visitors were

asked to adopt the perspective of these children. One of the text labels stated: 'Imagine yourself as an eight-year-old child. One day, you're put on a ship and sent thousands of miles from home, never to see your parents or siblings again.' In contrast, the perpetrators of these schemes were only obliquely referred to as 'policy makers, religious organisations, and charities'. Visitors were thus encouraged to have two different but interrelated emotive responses to this exhibit: to empathise with the children and to angrily condemn the child migration schemes. Empathy for the children was essential for prompting visitors to condemn the policy.

Again, this distinction between British individuals and colonial policies subtly makes engaging with the colonial past more comfortable for visitors, as challenging notions of historical responsibility or contemporary implication are sidestepped. The colonial past is critiqued within a narrow parameter. The British public are presented as the victims, rather than the perpetrators of cruel colonial policies and historical examples of racism are detached from contemporary racism.

Absences and imbalances

The diverse forms of violence and exploitation that were central to British colonialism were largely absent from the exhibition. At times, these were vaguely alluded to in the exhibition texts, in contrast to the prominent and engrossing personal stories of colonial settlers. Through this imbalance, histories of how colonialism impacted indigenous people subjected to British colonialism appeared as marginal qualifications to the experiences of Britons.

Indeed, these narratives were easy to miss altogether. It was only after my visit, when I looked more closely at my photographs of the exhibition that I noticed several short textual references to forms of colonial violence and exploitation in a display titled 'Empire'. A label referred to the 'invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1882' through which Britain took 'de facto control over the country and the Suez Canal'. Another referred to the First Opium War (1839–1842), 'which Britain had waged against China to force the country to open its economy to Western trade'. These narratives hinted at a vital context to emigration. Following the Opium War, for example, 'the port of Shanghai had become accessible to foreigners'. Officially sanctioned forms of violence and exploitation enabled personal stories of British emigration, but these were hidden within exhibits that centred decontextualised personal experiences.

Some displays did not acknowledge or interrogate the colonial context to British emigration at all. At the entrance, a series of posters hung on the wall alongside a text panel that asked, 'Why Leave?' These posters were colonial propaganda, designed to encourage white Britons to settle in the colonies, but there was no acknowledgement of this. I found this particularly unsettling because the imagery of these posters asserts white supremacy. One encourages white Britons to settle in Rhodesia; it presents life in the colony as idyllic, with a picturesque scene of

a large house surrounded by plush rolling hills. It also presents colonial life as profitable. Wheat, corn, fruit and livestock suggest an abundance of produce and a black African labour force is depicted in the background in a settlement of wooden huts. A series of contrasts are established; landowner and labourer, civilised and primitive, white and black. This poster was designed to reassure potential settlers that they would have wealth, comfort and power, even as a 'typical Rhodesian'. It speaks to a history of land seizure, the exploitation of African labour and the white supremacy that sought to justify these, yet this was not explicitly acknowledged or critically interrogated. Can we allow such imagery to speak for itself or does this propagate colonial propaganda?



A poster advertising settlement in Rhodesia, at the entrance to 'Departures' at the Migration Museum, London, 19 May – 13 February 2022, photo courtesy of the author

Colonialism as complex

Through these multiple representations of British colonialism, 'Departures' represented the colonial past as a complex subject, rather than characterising it in any singular way. It presented this history as a contested subject for debate, rather than something to be altogether condemned. It implied that Britain's colonial past can be viewed both empathetically and critically and that these characterisations do not negate one another.

Yet I find it challenging to reconcile these diverse representations in this way. It is important to consider what function an understanding of British colonialism as complex serves, and to recognise that this presumption of complexity is not a neutral and self-evident way of engaging with the colonial past. In 'Departures', colonialism appeared as a complex combination of innocuous British individuals and a brutal, but faceless, system of oppression. The role of emigrants in this system of oppression, which need not leave them undeserving of our empathy, is surely relevant but was wholly absent. In any case, the exhibition privileged the experiences of British individuals in isolation from the impact of colonialism.

Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield argue that the emphasis that museums place on 'discussion and debate' results in the 'circumvention' of uncomfortable colonial legacies and therefore 'inaction' in addressing them.⁷ Through the representation of the colonial past as complex, 'Departures' presented it as a subject for debate. It is up to visitors to choose whether they judge this history positively or negatively. Indeed, the exhibition stated that 'our views on the impact of Empire can be deeply personal'. This entails a kind of circumvention; visitors are not prompted to confront questions of shared responsibility or implication and how the legacies of colonialism might be addressed.

Through looking at British emigration, the Migration Museum seeks to change public attitudes regarding the movement of people. However, by incorporating colonial histories into this framework, it unintentionally normalises and even celebrates British colonialism. This raises the question, then, of how colonial histories can be productively incorporated into broader thematic frameworks. As a sector, further critical reflection is needed regarding how colonial histories can be incorporated into museums without containing them.

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⁷ Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield, 'A "safe space" to debate colonial legacy: The University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Campaign to Return a Looted Benin Altarpiece to Nigeria', *Museum Worlds*, Volume 7, No 1, July 2019, pp 1–22