

'Who Do You Think You Are?'

Darren Sylvester reports on the BBC Two television series where the well-known BBC newsreader, Moira Stuart, attempts to go back to her roots and research her family history (programme shown on 16th November 2004)

Reasons for migration

At the beginning of the hour-long episode, Moira expressly reveals that she doesn't know where she belongs – she was born in Britain, but, ironically, whenever asked where is she from, confesses to never being able to provide a definitive answer.

Marjorie, Moira's mother, was born in the Commonwealth of Dominica in 1921. Marjorie's parents - Trinidadian Edgar Fitzgerald Gordon, and his wife, Clara (nee Christian) sent Majorie to Britain as they wanted her to attend a Catholic convent. In 1935, Majorie and her three sisters, Barbara, Joyce and Evelyn arrived in England and attended "*La Sargasse Convent School*" in Hampshire.

Despite the major upheaval, the girls' forged lives in England. After training as a nurse, Marjorie fell in love with Harold Stuart, a Barbadian lawyer. Moira's parents married in 1943 and moved to Edinburgh, however, the marriage ended and the couple divorced when Moira was just ten-months old.

The family's past

Edinburgh had already featured in the family's past. Marjorie's father (and Moira's grandfather), Edgar Gordon, had studied medicine there. He arrived in Scotland in 1912 following a three-week voyage, as Moira discovered. There were few black students at that time in Edinburgh, hardly any of them female. Clara Christian was one. Following the wishes of her father, the Hon. George James Christian, she was studying medicine. It was halfway through her course when she fell in love and married Edgar, in 1917. Consequently, she didn't graduate, even though her academic records show her to have passed each and every subject taken.

Qualifying and working in Scotland

Further research revealed that Edgar qualified in or around 1918 as a Physician. He accepted a job at the Sanatorium in the town of *Kingussie*, Inverness, where he looked after people with Tuberculosis. By then, Edgar and Clara had a one year-old child, Barbara, and later, while still in *Kingussie*, their twins Joyce and

Evelyn were born. As the birth records of Majorie reveal that she was born in Dominica in 1921, it can therefore be deduced that Edgar and Clara spent approximately three years in the cold, Highland air of *Kingussie*.

George James Christian Jnr

Edgar was not the only significant historical figure in Moira's family history. George James Christian, her great grandfather on her grandmother Clara's side, was a powerful man with a passionate interest in progressive politics. He was born in Dominica in 1869 and, although having a humble background, became a schoolteacher.

With ambitions to become a barrister, he travelled "cargo class" to London in 1899 and enrolled at the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn. In 1902, the records at Gray's Inn confirm that he was Called to the Bar in the Trinity term. The year 1900 saw George James Christian involved in the first Pan-African Congress in London, which was held to promote and protect the interests of persons of African descent, particularly in the British colonies. George James Christian was "at the heart of proceedings" and his speech was reported at length in *The Times*. Moira learnt that after his studies, George James Christian travelled to the Gold Coast in West Africa and made a name for himself as a lawyer and politician.

George James Christian Snr

Moira visited Dominica to find out about her great, great grandfather. Her cousin shared information with her that George James Christian Snr was born in Antigua and managed to qualify as a schoolteacher. He left Antigua for Dominica just a few years after slavery was abolished in 1834. Whilst in Dominica, Moira visited Dr Lennox Honychurch who expounded upon the likely reasons why George James Christian Snr would have arrived in Dominica after emancipation.

Dr Lennox Honychurch gave the likely reason for George James Christian Snr leaving Antigua. He articulated that post emancipation, land in Antigua was still plantations, which were owned by whites - there was very little room for ex-slaves to build a new life for themselves under this system. Dominica, however, had many little "holdings" or "plots" available, which gave the added freedom to ex-slaves to become landholders.

Moira flew to Antigua and immediately discovered that in the early 19th century, Antigua was divided between plantation owners and former slaves. It was also ascertained that George James Christian Snr came from "Green Bay", near St. John's, Antigua – and probably was educated by the "Moravians", the Protestant church that educated black slaves in the Caribbean.

Shocking revelation

From Moira's research it emerged that the "pedigree" of the Christian name had arrived in Antigua since 1699. It was further thought that Moira's ancestors would have adopted the name Christian by taking their slave owner's name. The shocking revelation presented itself when Moira discovered that her ancestors were a combination of white plantation owners and those enslaved thereunder. In the programme, Moira openly confessed that she did not expect to acknowledge slave owners as those amongst her true ancestors; and further elucidated that it would take "some time before the echoes and shouts of that experience fade".

Conclusion

This programme was exceptionally enlightening, educational and thought-provoking. Whilst Moira categorically asserted that she "doesn't want to be confined or defined by slavery" – Moira's experiences have to be an excellent illustration that one cannot, in any way, have a nice, easy or simple answer to the question "**who am I?**"

A very informative website for those interested in Caribbean migration to Britain can be found at the web address: <http://www.movinghere.org.uk>

Darren Sylvester is a member of the DONA

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