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Mariner, renegade, castaway: Chris Braithwaite, seamen's organiser and Pan-Africanist

Introduction

In 1945, the British socialist feminist novelist Ethel Mannin, a ‘determined collector of “interesting people”’, penned a satirical novel, *Comrade O Comrade*, reminiscing about the politics of the British far-Left during the 1930s.² Subtitled ‘low-down on the Left’, Mannin noted that ‘not all the characters in this story are entirely fictitious’. “‘The distinguished coloured Trotskyist’ is recognisable to those who know the Left intimately’ – it was a portrait of the great black Trinidadian Marxist historian and writer C.L.R. James – but also ‘the Negro socialist who turns up at various meetings will also be recognised by some people’.

He died not long ago, and the socialist and anti-imperialist struggle lost a valiant fighter by his death, and many of us, myself included, a good comrade and friend. I am quite certain that he would not merely not have minded my short caricatures of him in this book but, on the contrary, feel flattered.³

This figure first appeared in the novel appearing on a platform speaking alongside the famous veteran anarchist Emma Goldman at a rally in London in solidarity with the Spanish Revolution:

He had an enormous voice, an impassioned desire to secure justice and freedom for his oppressed people in Africa, a contempt for the Communists, and an unabounded admiration for Mary Thane [a character who was chairing the meeting, loosely modelled on Ethel Mannin herself] ... The Negro loved speaking; he loved haranguing the crowd. He was in his element. He had five hundred and more people ranged in rows before him. It was a superb opportunity to put the anti-Imperialist case, with special reference to Africa. “Does he know this is a meeting about Spain, dear?” “Red Emma” twanged bitterly into Mary’s ear. Mary made frantic efforts to pass a time-up note to the Negro, but he was in a river of rhetoric, a torrent of words, in full spate, and nothing short of a blow over the head would have stopped him. He ... went on for a solid hour before reaching his final peroration. Then, covered with sweat and triumph, and amid prolonged applause, he came round to the back of the table and shook Mary by the hand, grinning hugely. This intensified the applause and he turned and bowed to the audience before seating himself. He was fine, Mary thought, passionately sincere in the fight for his oppressed people, only – only ... it just didn’t happen to be a meeting about British Imperialism...⁴

The black radical orator portrayed here was the Barbadian agitator and organiser Chris Braithwaite (c1885-1944), better known under his adopted pseudonym ‘Chris Jones’. Braithwaite, as leader of the Colonial Seamen’s Association (CSA) and an important ‘class struggle Pan-Africanist’, was perhaps the critical lynchpin of an anti-colonial maritime subaltern network in and around the imperial metropolis of inter-war

London.⁵ It was during the 1930s when briefly around the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and then in militant Pan-Africanist organisations like the International African Friends of Abyssinia [Ethiopia] (IAFA) and the International African Service Bureau (IASB), led by such towering revolutionary socialists as George Padmore and C.L.R. James, that Braithwaite's talents as an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist activist came to the fore. His contribution has long been acknowledged by scholars of militant anti-colonialism as important enough to make him 'one of the leading black activists in Britain in the 1930s', to quote Jonathan Derrick.⁶ Yet despite such formal recognition in the scholarly literature, Braithwaite still remains a distinctly overlooked, if not almost forgotten figure, particularly in the wider collective memory of black British radicalism and black internationalism more generally.⁷ This essay will attempt to provide for the first time a brief introductory overview of the life and work of this black radical Caribbean activist, a clearly outstanding figure in the rich but hidden history of the twentieth-century revolutionary black and red Atlantic. It will also explore how radical black colonial seamen like Braithwaite not only resisted oppression and exploitation in the British shipping industry and in the imperial metropolis itself but also enabled militant Pan-Africanist organisations in Britain, the 'dark heart' of the empire, to establish networks of resistance throughout the colonial world.

Barbadian Mariner

Of Chris Braithwaite's early life in colonial Barbados very little is currently known, but George Padmore, in his 1944 obituary of his friend and comrade, informs us that:

Chris was born in Barbados, in the West Indies, 59 years ago, and started to go to sea at a very early age. As a seaman he had the opportunity to travel round the world. The world was thus his university, and what an education it provided him! It was always a pleasure to hear Chris, who was of a most gay and youthful temperament, relate his many sailor's yarns, and, in his more serious moments, to listen to him describing the conditions of the working-class in the various lands it was his good fortune to visit.⁸

It is not surprising that the young Braithwaite, having grown up in the materially impoverished British colony of Barbados felt the need to emigrate early on, given the catastrophic decline afflicting the sugar industry across the Caribbean.⁹ The British merchant navy, where Braithwaite found employment, was, alongside shipping, cotton textiles, shipbuilding and coal, one of the staple industries of British capitalism. By the turn of the century, growing international competition had led to cheaper colonial labour being increasingly employed, and young black seamen like Braithwaite were recruited in large numbers. A sense of the nature of his work in the merchant navy can be gleaned from a 1943 interview Braithwaite gave to the radical poet, editor, publisher and journalist Nancy Cunard, who informs us he 'was "chief donkey-man" (responsible for good working of engines), [and] sailed the seven seas'.¹⁰ Such particularly tough work below decks in often unbearable temperatures, stoking and trimming the coal, was typical of the exploitative and dangerous conditions experienced by colonial seamen. Much shipping was freight, and work often involved long voyages on 'tramp' ships, and colonial seamen were, as Laura Tabili explains in her important 1994 work on the experience of colonial seamen in late imperial Britain, "*We Ask for*

British Justice”, ‘a labour reserve filling the least desirable and least steady jobs’ such as firemen or caterers.¹¹ The British merchant navy was particularly dependent on the sacrifices made by colonial seamen during the Great War amidst conscription of native seamen to the Royal Navy.¹²

Travelling the world as a young black seamen at a time when white supremacy so flagrantly and blatantly dominated under the flags of competing European empires could not have failed then to awaken Braithwaite to the harsh reality of race, and a report of a speech he gave in 1941 saw him declare ‘that for forty years he has been a rolling stone in every part of the world and that he had yet to find a spot where under white domination elementary freedom is granted to the subject races’.¹³ Yet such work gave him time to read and think, and from correspondence with Ethel Mannin, Barbara Bush informs us that despite a lack of formal education, Braithwaite reputedly read widely while employed in the Merchant Navy.¹⁴ Nancy Cunard notes that after ‘sailing the seven seas’ before and during the Great War, Braithwaite moved to America and worked for a period ‘in a New York bar.’¹⁵ This is again not so surprising, for the United States was the most common destination for black West Indian migrants, though it is impossible here to do justice to the way in which the apparent freedoms of the ‘Negro Metropolis’ of New York, home of the Harlem Renaissance, in particular appeared so attractive.¹⁶ Braithwaite would have not been so out of place in New York, for as Winston James notes, ‘among the black migrants to New York were thousands of mariners’.¹⁷ Indeed, while we currently know little of Braithwaite’s own experience of New York, it seems to have been quite formative and not altogether marred by the horrifically generally high levels of American racism – quite different to the racism of the black majority societies of the Caribbean. Indeed, when the black American academic Ralph Bunche later met the ‘very interesting’ Braithwaite in London in early

1937, he revealingly described him as coming ‘from Barbados and N.Y.’ in his diaries, and recorded that Braithwaite ‘thinks U.S. is the best country’.¹⁸

Many black Caribbean mariners settled in America, and some became leading politically radical militants in the American working class movement like Ferdinand Smith, the Jamaican born co-founder of the National Maritime Union and the equally remarkable figure of Hugh Mulzac, who after travelling to New York from Barbados worked for a period as a ship captain on Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line.¹⁹ However, while Braithwaite’s relationship to Garveyism remains unknown, we know he soon left America and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to make the ‘voyage in’ to imperial Britain, where, as Padmore noted, ‘Chris settled down in London as an employee of the Shipping Federation’.²⁰ Braithwaite’s work for the employer’s Shipping Federation, based in London’s Docklands, home to many black seamen, was a highly responsible and ‘respectable’ job. As a Shipping Federation agent in ‘the Pool’, part of the River Thames where many ships come to dock, Braithwaite was responsible for finding and supplying colonial seamen, engineers, stokers and others, often at a few hours notice. As he himself later told Nancy Cunard, he was ‘the only coloured man to have this as-a-rule white-man’s job’.²¹ However, and quite remarkably given the relatively privileged job he had acquired, he soon politically radicalised and immersed himself in the British working class movement. As Padmore recalled, Braithwaite ‘had always taken an active part in the working-class struggles of this country [Britain], especially those affecting seamen – white as well as coloured’.²²

Such a political radicalisation in the aftermath of the Great War in Britain was a common enough experience for black colonial seamen, for the very experience of settlement during this period may have in itself challenged any early ingrained identification with ‘imperial Britishness’ they may have had. Though, as Tabili notes,

‘the few thousand Black seamen living in Britain were only the most visible of a global and multiracial colonised population whose labour sustained Britain’s imperial power’, ‘the political economy of Britain’s declining maritime empire created structural conditions conducive to conflict’ in Britain itself.²³ The year 1919 of course had famously seen bloody race riots against ethnic minorities in nine British seaports - Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, Hull, London, Liverpool, Newport, Cardiff and Barry. Thousands of native British merchant seamen had returned home from fighting in the Great war in search of employment to find not only housing shortages and the shipowners attacking wages and jobs but also a new level of competition for the few jobs around from black, Arab, Chinese and South Asian seamen. Many rallied to the slogan ‘Britishers first’.²⁴ ‘British men for British ships’ was another slogan raised, and such racist scapegoating was encouraged by the shipowners.²⁵

Accordingly, Tabili writes that ‘interwar struggles were in part about efforts to “expel” colonized people who had collectively and symbolically if not always personally entered the metropolitan workforce during the war’.²⁶ The British state itself – through its Aliens control bureaucracy – ensured that the post war decline of British shipping was accompanied by a redefinition of British identity – a process that had been accelerated by wartime xenophobia against Germans. Black and Asian colonial subjects had limited access to British passports, which as Tabili notes were ‘documents virtually unheard of for ordinary people before the war and unavailable in many parts of the empire’ but ‘Alien’s legislation’ in 1919 and 1920 required ‘alien seamen’ – in practice often undocumented black British colonial subjects – to register with local police if their stay ashore exceeded two months. In 1925, the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order eliminated the 60-day grace period and so was ‘the first instance of state-sanctioned racial subordination inside Britain to come to

widespread notice', 'requiring all Black seamen in Britain's major ports to establish their British nationality or be registered as aliens'.²⁷ Once registered as an 'alien' with the police, black and Asian seamen became liable to deportation from what many, as colonial subjects, had been their 'mother country'. Braithwaite personally seems to have been better positioned to survive such a danger resulting from racist state practices through his relationship with and marriage to Edna, a young white woman originally from Derbyshire. They settled in Stepney, an area in the East End of London in close proximity to the West India docks. White women such as Edna were critical to the development of areas of long-standing black settlement as Stepney, and marriage or co-habitation enabled black seamen to claim domicile status and also entitlement to both better-paid work and relief.²⁸

The fact that several thousand African and Caribbean seamen like Braithwaite settled in Britain gave them an important advantage over say, the tens of thousands of Indian 'Lascar', Arab or Chinese sailors who remained resident outside Britain, often in the colonies, and so only constituted temporary contract labour, with much reduced pay and conditions. Yet though black seamen like Braithwaite often managed to secure the 'standard articles' given to white seamen, they still held a fixed place in a racial hierarchy below the majority of seamen of European origin.²⁹ As Baruch Hirson and Lorraine Vivian noted, colonial sailors were 'caught in a Catch 22 situation. Those who signed on at a colonial port were accused by British seamen of depressing wages while those who sought a berth in Britain [with a chance of better if not equal pay] ... were accused of depriving local men of jobs.'³⁰ The National Union of Seamen (NUS), and its forerunner, the National Sailor's and Firemen's Union (NSFU), were complicit in the racially divisive practices fixing unequal pay in British shipping, and had co-operated closely with the employer's Shipping Federation in the state sanctioned

National Maritime Board (NMB), set up during the Great War. As Tabili notes, the NUS played a role ‘perpetuating the threat cheap labour constituted to men paid standard wages’ while “‘joint supply” boards composed of NMB affiliated unions’ and owners’ representatives would now control the distribution of jobs; [so] in practice sailors and firemen must join the NSFU to obtain employment’.³¹ Key to ensuring this took place was the introduction of a PC5 identification card for seamen in 1921/22 – and so black seamen like Braithwaite were forced to join the seamen’s union to get a PC5 card and so have any chance of finding work.³²

Accordingly, as Tabili notes, ‘interwar practices in effect recolonised Black seamen in Britain, giving maritime employers privileged access to their labour’, and if the need for a PC5 identification card led to the NSFU becoming ‘the first union to encounter significant numbers of black workers’ in Britain, union leaders actively colluded with the British state and shipowners to sustain racial barriers and reconstitute ‘imperial racial inequalities’ in Britain itself. Racism tended to manifest itself with allusions to white English seamen as a ‘maritime race’ with ‘salt in the blood’ in contrast to degenerate and dehumanised ‘tropical races’.³³ Inside the NUS itself, racial discrimination was also commonplace, and as Tabili notes, ‘repeated approaches by black union members seeking a voice in union governance were rebuffed’.³⁴ Yet while Braithwaite doubtless found such experiences disheartening, he would also point out the class dimensions of the matter, stressing for example in 1938 how racism flowed from the employers’ agenda of ‘Divide and Rule’:

Colour discrimination is widespread in the marine industry, and it is exploited by the employers to play off one section of workers against the other. During my twenty years’ membership of the Seaman’s Union, I have often been confronted like many African

and West Indian seamen, with all kinds of racial chauvinism. Very frequently engineers would be willing to hire Negro seamen were it not for the objection raised by some white seamen that “If you take the darkie, we will not sign on the ship.”³⁵

With such a clear perspective, it is not surprising that, as Padmore put it, ‘every progressive movement concerned with the welfare of seagoing folk’ had the support of Braithwaite, even though sadly we currently know all too little about his union activism during the 1920s.³⁶ Indeed we do not get our first real glimpse of him as an NUS militant until the summer of 1929 after the NUS itself had been temporarily expelled from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for acting as a blackleg union during the 1926 General Strike, through a surviving letter that he wrote to the leadership of the union. Braithwaite reported ‘a very good and somewhat steamy chat with Jimmie Henson’, who as Tabili notes, was ‘a prominent NUS official temporarily estranged from the union and organising the Trades Union Congress [supported] Seamen’s Section [of Ernest Bevin’s Transport and General Workers’ Union], a rival union’.³⁷ Braithwaite reports of Henson that

he stopped and spoke quietly then like a tornado, he let loose on me saying he never thought that I would assist at breaking up his meetings here in London ... [and that] the Boys in Cardiff will tell me a thing or two when they hear that I helped to break up his meetings ... I got indignant at this remark. I told Henson if he wished me to, I will go to Cardiff tonight, or got to Hell with him or anyone who can discredit me in the eyes of my colour, as I have done nothing to be ashamed of.³⁸

Tabili suggests ‘the intensity of Braithwaite’s retort’ to a leading white trade unionist like Henson ‘perhaps reflected the painful choice he and other Black seamen faced, to join and support a union that subordinated and marginalized them or to remain even more vulnerable outside it’. At best, and this statement remains a distinct understatement given the institutional racism which so afflicted the NUS, Tabili notes that ‘the story of the NUS and Black seamen is one of tragically missed opportunity’:

The union fruitlessly pursued exclusion of the few thousand Black seamen in standard conditions of work, while colluding in the displacement of white and Black unionised seamen by growing numbers of super-exploited contract labourers. They rebuffed Black sailors’ calls for union support and rejected overtures from colonial unions that might have forged an empirewide, thus global, labour movement to challenge continuing stratification.³⁹

Revolutionary Renegade - Chris Braithwaite becomes Chris Jones

An attempt to build such a internationalist labour movement among seamen during the 1920s was made by the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) began to work towards organising both native and colonial seamen through the National Minority Movement (NMM), formed in 1924, as well as the Transport Workers Minority Movement – two organisations associated with the Profintern, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). The Transport Workers Minority Movement stressed in 1928 that the ‘Lascar [Indian], Chinaman, Arab or West Indian Negro’ seaman was not to blame for unemployment or low wages – and

that ‘an injury to coloured seamen is a blow struck at British seamen’.⁴⁰ By April 1930 the NMM had a Colonial Committee and the recently formed Seamen’s Minority Movement (SMM) had a committee formed of ‘militant coloured seamen’. Chris Braithwaite – or rather now ‘Chris Jones’, the pseudonym he adopted to avoid the all too real threat of victimisation - chaired the second meeting of the ‘Committee of Coloured Seamen’ of the SMM, a meeting attended by eleven blacks and three whites, and which elected a Trinidadian seaman, Jim Headley, to be its secretary. Marika Sherwood notes that Communist Party work among colonial seamen now improved. Headley in Poplar set up the International Seamen’s Club while in late 1931 the leading African-American Communist James Ford could report to the Profintern’s International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUC – NW) that ‘at Liverpool, Cardiff and London, Negro Comrades in cooperation with the SMM have been carrying out work among Negro seamen’.⁴¹ It is not known exactly when Braithwaite actually joined the Communist Party himself – but it might then be dated from his work with militants in the SMM. As early as April 1930, as Stephen Howe notes, one of undercover agents of the British state could describe Braithwaite as ‘the CP’s most valuable contact among colonial seamen’.⁴² By 1931, ‘Chris Jones’ was a member of the CPGB itself, and a leading figure in the SMM.⁴³ His political radicalisation towards Marxism in this period must be seen in the context of the greatest economic crisis in the history of capitalism, which unfolded following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and the growing mood for a fightback among seamen as, in the words of one SMM leader, George Hardy, ‘the employers tried to work off the cost of the crisis on to the workers’ back’.⁴⁴

However, while the recruitment of such an experienced militant as Braithwaite was impressive, colonial seamen remained a tiny fraction of the membership of the SMM during this period. By February 1932, of the 1,000 odd members of the SMM

only twenty-three were ‘colonials’. Accordingly, in early 1932 Headley wrote to his compatriot George Padmore – author of the classic anti-imperialist pamphlet *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* who had replaced Ford as head of the Profintern’s Negro Bureau and now edited the *Negro Worker* – asking him ‘for a definite lead in order that the good work may be carried on’. In April 1932, Padmore briefly visited London, and met Braithwaite when they both spoke at a meeting organised by another Communist sponsored organisation, International Labour Defence (ILD), in solidarity with the Scottsboro Boys.⁴⁵ The Scottsboro case had dominated headlines internationally since March 1931, and saw eight black boys charged with the alleged rape of two white girls on a train in Alabama and facing the death penalty.⁴⁶ Among the black Communists based in London, Braithwaite came to the fore in speaking out on the Scottsboro case, perhaps because, like Padmore himself, he had direct experience of racism in America. As Padmore recalled,

I first met Chris about ten years ago. It was on the occasion of the mass meeting organised in London on behalf of the Scottsboro’ boys, eight Negro youths who were being railroaded to death by American “justice”. We were both speakers at that meeting, and from then a warm comradeship developed between us. Chris’s participation in the endeavour to seek true justice for those Scottsboro’ victims of class and race prejudice was typical of him. He never spared himself in rendering aid to the cause of the oppressed.⁴⁷

If Padmore was impressed by Braithwaite, it is clear that Braithwaite was also equally impressed by Padmore, later praising him as ‘the greatest leader of the Negroes

in any part of the world'.⁴⁸ Padmore was however disappointed with the progress of the CPGB through the SMM with respect to organising among colonial seamen. He wrote that he 'discovered when I visited Britain that there are so many Negroes there and some even in the Party. Yet not one has ever been sent over by the British movement' for training in Moscow.⁴⁹ In May 1932, at the first 'World Congress of Seamen', organised in difficult circumstances in Hamburg, Padmore would declare with respect to organising colonial seamen that 'it is the task of the advanced water proletariat in Europe and America to take the initiative of drawing these workers into their ranks and fighting their everyday battles', something he felt the CPGB through the SMM had generally failed to do effectively in Britain.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, the ILD campaign in Britain around Scottsboro was impressive and Chris Braithwaite would speak four times in London in total on the issue, clearly establishing a reputation for himself as a powerful orator in the process.⁵¹ For example, on 14 July 1932 at Trinity Hall, Poplar in the East End of London Braithwaite spoke alongside Ada Wright, mother of one of the Scottsboro Boys. As a report in the Negro Worker noted of Braithwaite's speech,

This comrade explained very well how this particular case only went to show how the capitalist class was spreading race hatred between white and black in order to disrupt the comradely solidarity between the working masses. He closed by stating that he hoped to see the united front of all workers, irrespective of race, colour or creed against the capitalist class – in their common class struggle.⁵²

Chris Braithwaite's dynamism as an activist in this period also comes through from the role he played in launching the militant anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist

organisation Negro Welfare Association (NWA) in 1931. The NWA, affiliated to the League Against Imperialism (LAI) and the ITUC-NW, was at the heart of the wider Scottsboro defence campaign in Britain, and had, as Matthew Worley notes, been ‘formed on the initiative of two Afro-Caribbean communists, Arnold Ward and Chris Jones’.⁵³ Arnold Ward, the NWA secretary, was a compatriot of Braithwaite’s, born in 1886 in Barbados, and is another critical but overlooked figure in the history of radical Pan-Africanism in 1930s Britain.⁵⁴ By 1932, Chris Braithwaite was clearly a trusted and respected member of the Communist Party, and we find him involved for example in November 1932 leading a protest at the imprisonment of National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) leader Wal Hannington outside Wormwood Scrubs prison. As *The Times* noted, ‘the assembly was small and orderly and appeared to derive great satisfaction from the singing of the Internationale’.⁵⁵ By 1933, Braithwaite, the black seamen’s organiser, had also struck up a remarkable friendship with the radical Nancy Cunard, whose family famously owned a huge shipping dynasty which refused to allow black seamen anywhere near the decks of their passenger liners until the 1950s. Cunard was then editing her monumental 800-page fusion of *Communism and Pan-Africanism, Negro Anthology*, for publication in London, and together with Braithwaite would serve for a period on the committee of the NWA.⁵⁶ According to Cunard’s biographer Anne Chisholm,

the West Indian communist organiser Chris Jones was a friend of Nancy’s at this time, and there were frequent meetings of black radicals at her flat. Nancy admired Jones’s skill as an orator and political organiser and told [Henry] Crowder [her partner] that someone should subsidise him so that he could have a political career. Crowder was not impressed.⁵⁷

There is a famous picture taken of Braithwaite on a May Day demonstration in London in 1933 with an ILD placard – just one of several photographs of ‘Comrade Chris Jones’ published in Padmore’s *Negro Worker* - and we learn from Jonathan Derrick that ‘in June 1933 it was agreed, at a meeting in Nancy Cunard’s house in London, to found an International Labour Defence London Coloured Committee, with Jones as chairman’.⁵⁸

However, Braithwaite’s career in the Communist Party would not last much longer. After Hitler had come to power in 1933, Stalin had moved to try and make diplomatic approaches with Britain and France for reasons of national security, and the theorists of the Communist International accordingly now drew a distinction between the ‘Democratic Imperialist’ countries of Britain, America and France on the one hand and the ‘Fascist Imperialist’ powers of Germany, Italy and Japan on the other. In August 1933, Padmore had made what he retrospectively claimed with justification as a principled resignation from the Communist International over their sidelining of support for anti-colonialist struggle against the supposedly ‘democratic’ and ‘peace-loving’ British and French colonial dictatorships in Africa. For his troubles, Padmore now faced a vicious Stalinist witch-hunt – and black Communists like Braithwaite had to now take sides – either loyalty to Padmore or loyalty to the Communist International. It is testimony to Braithwaite and his revolutionary internationalism that unlike many others – for example the likes of his compatriot and comrade Arnold Ward, who would remain in the CPGB for another two years – he decided to also resign in protest from the Communist Party in 1933.⁵⁹ It was with Braithwaite clearly in mind that Ward in frustration reported to Communist officials that Padmore was sowing seeds of dissension ‘among the colonials’ and ‘told [his] story in a way that comrades believe him still’.⁶⁰ That the loss of Braithwaite and the network of militant colonial seamen he

had around him was keenly felt by the CPGB from now on might be inferred from a complaint made in 1934 by a leading Communist, Shapurji Saklatvala: ‘Many things happen among the colonial seamen in the East End of London and members of the Party and of the unemployed workers’ movement, living right in the locality know nothing about it’.⁶¹

The Colonial Seamen’s Association and Class Struggle Pan-Africanism

The resulting relative political isolation of Braithwaite must have been hard.⁶² Now with a growing family to support - Braithwaite would ultimately father six children in Britain – he was struggling to organise colonial seamen with very limited support from the NUS but now also without the comradeship and support of the Communist Party, though he remained close to the NWA.⁶³ Yet it is testament to both his principles of attempting to forge multiracial and class unity and his tenacity and indefatigability as an organiser that in 1935 he would now achieve perhaps his greatest victory. In 1935, Braithwaite would emerge as the foremost tribune of black and Asian seamen opposing the new British Shipping Subsidy Act, which Tabili notes ‘effectively excluded undocumented Black British subjects from state-subsidized ships’.⁶⁴ With the likes of the Seamen’s Minority Movement now long dead – a victim of the Stalinised Communist International’s turn away from its ‘Class against class’ line towards the Popular Front against fascism - on 30 July 1935, Braithwaite took the initiative to organise a meeting of twenty colonial seamen at 68 East London Dock Road to resist this new attack. With support from existing organisations such as the NWA and the LAI, this meeting decided to form a new organisation, the Colonial Seamen’s Association (CSA).⁶⁵ Impressively, from the very start the organisation embraced not only black colonial seamen, but also other Asian seamen, such as the Indian ‘Lascars’

as well. As the Indian Communist and seamen's organiser Surat Alley recalled, the CSA 'started at the time when Italian Fascism threat[ened to] attack Abyssinia [Ethiopia]. The Association was the expression of the discontent existing among the colonial seamen and its aim was to redress their grievances'.⁶⁶

Chris Braithwaite at the same time as organising the CSA also threw himself into building direct solidarity with the people of Ethiopia in the face of Mussolini's barbaric war plans. By August 1935, Padmore had arrived in London from France, and was soon helping his compatriot and boyhood friend C.L.R. James organise the new International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA). Braithwaite was a leading activist of this new Pan-African organisation, speaking alongside the likes of Amy Ashwood Garvey, the Jamaican Pan-Africanist and first wife of Marcus Garvey, and the Kenyan nationalist Jomo Kenyatta of the Kikuyu Central Association, in Trafalgar Square at a mass rally of the IAFA on Sunday 25 August 1935. This gathering resolved to defend Ethiopia and demanded a lifting of the embargo on selling arms to that country.⁶⁷ Matthew Quest has suggested that Braithwaite was also involved in mobilising his networks of colonial seamen, which attempted to organise 'direct action to undermine the economy and trade of Italy and smuggled weapons to Ethiopia through the maritime industry'.⁶⁸ Certainly, in September 1935, a general meeting of 'members, associate members and sympathisers' of the CSA unanimously passed a resolution describing Italy's looming war on Ethiopia 'an act of bestial aggression'. The CSA declared 'that wherever we are following our calling as seamen we shall protest against working in ships which we suspect are carrying munitions and war material for use against the Ethiopians and, if possible, we shall use our influence to prevent the delivery of such a cargo into the hands of the Fascist aggressors'.⁶⁹

On 3 June 1936, after Mussolini had declared his barbaric mission ‘accomplished’ in 1936, Barbara Bush notes that ‘Chris Braithwaite’s daughter presented flowers to Emperor Haile Selassie at an emotional “royal welcome” ceremony when Selassie and his family arrived in London in exile’.⁷⁰ As even *The Times*, a conservative paper not known for marking moments of mass anti-colonialist fervour, noted, ‘thousands of people were waiting outside the station to welcome the Emperor when he arrived’, with banners upheld declaring ‘Welcome to the Emperor’, ‘Well done Abyssinia’ and ‘Down with Fascism and War’. Amid the estimated 5,000 people gathered outside Waterloo Station to welcome the black emperor, the paper reported that ‘a little girl presented the Princess Tsahai with a bouquet of red and yellow roses’.⁷¹

Late November 1936 saw the first annual conference of the Colonial Seamen’s Association in London. Braithwaite, who was elected chair, ‘stressed the need of organisation as the one salvation of the colonial peoples’. Surat Alley was elected secretary. The range of support for the organisation was unprecedented and historic, given the ethnic divisions and hierarchical racial stratifications of British shipping encompassing not only black seamen but also Indians, Arabs and Chinese seamen, testament in part to the respect for Braithwaite’s tireless work and dedication. As Tabili notes,

attended by 51 delegates including representatives of the Negro Welfare Association, the Indian Swaraj League, the League Against Imperialism, the Cypriot Club, and the League of Coloured Peoples, the conference denounced the colour bar and the British

Shipping Assistance Act, invoking Black seamen's and subjects' service in the Great War.⁷²

The CSA demanded removal of 'disabilities' imposed on colonial seamen by 1935 Shipping Subsidy Act which gave preference to white seamen and also demanded that 'the seamen of the British Empire be given full democratic rights – the right to trade union organisation, freedom of speech and assembly'. As Sherwood notes, 'this was a great advance on the 1920s, when there had been no solidarity articulated between the various colonial seamen, and there had been no demands particular to their conditions'.⁷³ In early 1937, the West Indian economist W. Arthur Lewis praised the work of the CSA in the official journal of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), *The Keys*, noting it 'deserves all the encouragement it can get'.⁷⁴ In late June 1937, Braithwaite was invited to address the fifth annual conference of the LCP held at London's Memorial Hall on the matter of 'Britain's Coloured Seamen', where he 'gave a graphic account of the colonial seamen's troubles in this country'.

He said that the majority of the coloured people in this country were originally seamen, and that it is only through want of work that they have been obliged to remain ashore and take up such jobs as they can obtain. He gave a distressing account of the life they lead, and specially of those who have children to feed. He mentioned that the question of the employment of coloured seamen was not so acute at present on account of the boom in shipping, but maintains that this boom will not last, and expressed a fear that as they were the last to be signed on, they would also be the first to be fired.⁷⁵

Sherwood notes that ‘initially the CSA concentrated its efforts on the effects of the Shipping Subsidy Act: by late 1937 “the stringency of the application of the provisions of the Act was slackened”’ so ‘some success’ could be recorded.⁷⁶ One activist in the Association from early 1937 onwards, the West Indian T. Ras Makonnen, born George Thomas Nathaniel Griffith in British Guiana, has perhaps left historians the most vivid description of the work of the group under Braithwaite’s leadership. Makonnen described the CSA as ‘a welfare and propaganda grouping’, and recalled that since ‘we did not want a separate black union’ for colonial seamen, one of their jobs involved trying to persuade West African seamen resident in Britain to join the NUS, despite all its appalling failings.

They would be shown the weaknesses of staying un-unionised: that “if you do not join the union you’ll always be paid lower wages by the bosses, and this will separate you from your comrades”. Chris’s role as leader of his “union” was to act as a mouthpiece if there was any injustice that needed taking up. He had his contacts with the Labour Party and with us, and if there was any case with, say, Greek shippers not paying some of these black boys’ wages for nine months or more, he played an important role as a go-between. So he was looked on as a leader in the same way as some of the outstanding Irish dock leaders in New York.⁷⁷

Alongside his leadership of the multiethnic CSA went Braithwaite’s ‘class struggle Pan-Africanism’, which flourished in his role as organising secretary for George Padmore’s new ‘International African Service Bureau for the Defence of Africans and

People of African Descent'. The IASB had been formed in May 1937 with the assistance of I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, a towering giant of African trade-unionism originally from Sierra Leone, a former seaman who was now secretary of the West African Youth League.⁷⁸ In solidarity with the heroic arc of labour revolts which swept the colonial British Caribbean – including his native Barbados - during the late 1930s, Braithwaite repeatedly again took to the podium of Trafalgar Square alongside the likes of James and Padmore in early August 1937 and again in late June 1938.⁷⁹ The CSA also held separate meetings to discuss conditions in the West Indies during the labour revolts.⁸⁰

Ever since the Communist International's turn to the 'Popular Front', Braithwaite together with James and Padmore also used to go to CPGB meetings to heckle and expose the Communists 'pretensions at being revolutionists' by raising awkward questions about British imperialism.⁸¹ As James remembered, they would speak about the struggles of French and British colonial subjects who now had been forgotten as Britain and France were declared grand 'peace-loving democracies' and bulwarks against fascism. 'While I would ask a question, and Padmore might say a word or two, it was Chris Jones who made a hell of a row.'⁸² In another interview, James recalled that Braithwaite as 'a very fine comrade...Chris would get himself into a temper and explode and make a revolution at the back of the hall.'⁸³ James recalled of Braithwaite that 'at the shortest notice, he could generate indignation at the crimes of imperialism and the betrayals of Stalinism as to shock into awed silence hundreds of British people in the audience'.⁸⁴

The IASB developed close links with the socialist Independent Labour Party (ILP), which ensured their uncompromisingly anti-Imperialist argument reached a small but significant audience on the British Left, and clearly influenced many

intellectuals, including not only the likes of Ethel Mannin and her partner, the anti-imperialist writer Reginald Reynolds but also George Orwell.⁸⁵ Len Edmondson, an ILP member up in Gateshead during the 1930s, once recalled that Braithwaite, as well as James and Padmore, came up to address local ILP meetings. ‘He was a great character, Chris Jones. We had him at the Westfield Hall. He was a rough diamond but he was a very good chap.’⁸⁶

More critically, the IASB raised the case for, built solidarity with and helped ideologically arm colonial liberation struggles across the African diaspora. Braithwaite wrote a monthly column for the IASB journal, *International African Opinion*, entitled ‘Seamen’s Notes’. As Braithwaite wrote in an early issue in August 1938, he hoped ‘coloured seamen, be they African or West Indian, take an interest in this journal and make it their mouthpiece’.

We are living in desperate times and the coloured seamen have a great responsibility in helping their countrymen at home in the struggle for an improvement in their economic and social conditions. Those who sail between Europe and the West Indies can serve to keep their people informed about events and happenings in the various colonies and in this way serve as a link in uniting the struggles going on in all parts of the black world.⁸⁷

Matthew Quest has summarised some of the issues raised within Braithwaite’s columns, hailing him as ‘a voice of seamen that sailed between the United States and Caribbean, the Caribbean to Europe, and Europe to Africa’:

Fighting to maintain workplace standards of a maximum of 12 hours in a 24-hour day, he also worked for unity to resolve the problem of workers from Portuguese Goa and India undercutting Black and white peoples' wages. Jones also condemns and exposes "the D[istressed].B[ritish].S[eamen] clause," a section of Maritime contract law which allows ships to leave European ports shorthanded, picking up extra workers in Africa or the Caribbean. This clause allows the shipping industry to pay workers of colour only room and board with no wages.⁸⁸

One of the proudest moments of Braithwaite's political activism must have come in early 1939 when he was able to report news of the formation of a new African seamen's union, the Sierra Leone Union, formed after the recent return of Wallace-Johnson back home to Sierra Leone. As Braithwaite noted, 'the Union has enrolled over 1,500 members, embracing members of various tribes...the Sierra Leone Union should be an inspiration and incentive to the dock workers in other ports of West Africa, especially Takarodi, Accra, Lagos and Port Harcourt, to organise themselves in similar fashion'.⁸⁹

Through his contacts as chair of the CSA Braithwaite was also key to the distribution of IASB literature into colonial Africa and the Caribbean. As James recalled, 'we tried all ways' to get International African Opinion into the colonies, where such subversive literature was prohibited. 'We had one or two people who worked on the waterfront. They gave the pamphlets to seamen and people in boats...we got it around, to my astonishment and delight'.⁹⁰ The contacts Braithwaite and others made in turn fed information and reports back to the organisers in London. James, for example in his 1938 work *A History of Negro Revolt* describes how it was

colonial seamen who helped him appreciate and understand the mass appeal of the millenarian ideology driving many of the Copperbelt miners who took spontaneous strike action in Northern Rhodesia (what is now Zambia) in May 1935. As James noted, the growth of the 'Watch Tower Movement', linked to the Jehovah's Witnesses and based on 'Revelations of St. John the Baptist' in the Bible was a symbol of the coming African Revolution against European colonial domination. 'It is difficult to say exactly the true influence of the Watch Tower. The writer has been informed by Negro sailors that its influence is widely spread throughout Africa, and that it is the most powerful revolutionary force in Africa today.'⁹¹

During the Second World War, Maroula Joannou notes that 'black sailors in London lived mainly in the streets around the dockland which suffered heavily during the Blitz and worked not only as sailors but also as stokers, trimmers, greasers and engineers'. We still know all too little of Chris Braithwaite's activism and experience during this period, but he remained in regular contact with Nancy Cunard, who interviewed this 'West Indian friend of mine' in 1943 in order to compile reports for the Ministry of Information on among other matters the conditions of black seamen in the Merchant Navy.⁹² As Cunard noted, Braithwaite's work securing colonial maritime labour during the war was a 'vital urgency'.⁹³ Yet as 'Chris Jones' he continued to speak out against imperialism at public meetings. For example, on 29 January 1940, billed as a 'Negro socialist leader', he spoke alongside two Labour MPs, Fred Messer and Reg Sorensen, at a meeting entitled 'War! Why?' organised by North London Anti War Council.⁹⁴ In August 1941, at the ILP summer school held in Bangor, Wales, Braithwaite spoke alongside Ernest N. McKenzie, a Trinidadian teacher and journalist who edited a Birmingham based publication, the Negro Citizen, in what the ILP paper, the New Leader, described as 'one of the most interesting sessions of the school', one

where ‘the students left the session with a burning sense of the injustices suffered by the colonial workers’:

At the conclusion of his lecture, Chris Jones paid a glowing tribute to George Padmore...[and] associated himself with Padmore’s declaration that “The problem of the oppressed subject workers is to free themselves from the domination of foreign Imperialism. The problem of the exploited white workers is to free themselves from British Capitalism. It will then be possible for white workers and coloured workers to associate in genuine fraternity and to move forward to the building of the socialist Commonwealth”.⁹⁵

On 9 September 1944, Chris Braithwaite died suddenly of pneumonia. This blow hit George Padmore in particular very hard. One friend of Padmore’s from this period later recalled ‘the great pains he took to save the life of an old West Indian seafaring friend of his (I believe his name was Chris Jones) who was living in poor circumstances in the East End of London. He was deeply moved and stricken with grief upon his death.’⁹⁶ ‘Padmore always felt a special responsibility for the family of this tough, cheerful, uneducated worker’, becoming secretary of a committee to organise relief efforts to support Braithwaite’s widow and find foster homes for the children, four girls (Pamela, Jeannette, Catherine and Sian) and two boys (Laurie and Reginald George). Other members of the committee included Ras Makonnen, Ethel Mannin, Reginald Reynolds and John McNair (representing the ILP on the committee).⁹⁷ As McNair, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, stressed in his appeal for funds from ILP members in December 1944,

Chris worked unceasingly for Socialism, in the ILP, in his work with sailors, and wherever he could work effectively. He was a good and a grand fellow-worker and comrade in our cause. Chris left a wife and six children and a committee has been formed to give these little ones a chance in life...Remember the Basque kiddies whom we saved. Let's do it again!⁹⁸

Castaway on the Black and Red Atlantic

In 1925, the long serving president of the NUS, Joseph Havelock Wilson, had declared that 'I have always believed that British seamen have done more to discover and establish the British Empire, and to develop it. It will be the task of the same men of the sea to keep it'.⁹⁹ From the moment Chris Braithwaite arrived in Britain in the aftermath of the First World War up until his passing towards the close of the Second World War, he refused such a 'task' and instead fought against almost impossible odds and in the face of the most bitter racism for working class unity and an alternative, anti-imperialist socialist vision for seamen both in Britain and internationally. Some vindication of Braithwaite's 'class struggle Pan-Africanism' would come just over a year after his passing, when many of his old comrades – including Surat Alley, former secretary of the CSA, together with younger radicals such as the future leader of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah, who in his youth in America had been a member of the National Maritime Union - gathered in Manchester in October 1945 at the historic Fifth Pan-African Congress, and renewed their commitment to the struggle for African emancipation.¹⁰⁰

Both James and Padmore must have felt particularly moved by the passing of this older, dedicated Caribbean radical whose life and work must have in many ways represented their very ideal of a black ‘organic intellectual’ of the international working class movement. As Padmore noted, ‘many were the working-class battles and campaigns in which he gave his best. He was well known in ILP circles as a fine speaker and agitator, and one of the foremost champions of the coloured race.’ Chris Braithwaite’s passing was therefore ‘a great loss to the cause of the colonial peoples as well as International Socialism, the finest ideals and traditions of which he upheld to the very end...his memory will long remain as a symbol of the hopes and aspirations of his race’.¹⁰¹

It is not impossible that the memory of Chris Braithwaite was also in C.L.R. James’s mind when, in 1952, he wrote his work on ‘Herman Melville and the world we live in’, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*. James drew attention to the significance of one particularly striking passage in Melville’s classic novel *Moby Dick* (1851), which celebrated the collective organisation and struggles of the multiracial seafaring crew of the *Pequod*, the harpooners like Queequeg (a South Sea cannibal), Tashtego (an Indian) and Daggoo (an African). Melville’s hailing of ‘mariners, renegades and castaways’ stands, in its way, as a worthy tribute to Chris Braithwaite’s tireless work as a ‘fighter for the oppressed’:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exulted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rain-bow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all

mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which
hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!¹⁰²

References

¹ With very many thanks to Marika Sherwood, and also to Ian Birchall, Barbara Bush, David Featherstone, David Goodway, John Griffiths and David Howell. I am grateful to have been given the chance to give a paper on Braithwaite at the conference “‘Salty’ Geographies: Subaltern maritime networks, spaces and practices”, held at the University of Glasgow in October 2010. I am also indebted to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin for providing me with and then allowing me permission to quote from the 1943 report ‘On the coloured seamen in the Merchant Navy’ submitted to the Ministry of Information by Nancy Cunard. Christian Høgsbjerg has recently completed a doctoral thesis on ‘C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain, 1932-38’ in the Department of History at the University of York (U.K.), and is a member of the editorial board of *International Socialism* journal.

² R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: a life, Vol. II: the arch-poet, 1915-1939* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 511. On Mannin, see Andy Croft, ‘Ethel Mannin: the red rose of love and the red flower of liberty’, in Angela Ingram and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals; British women writers, 1889-1939* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993) and Robert Huxter, *Reg and Ethel: Reginald Reynolds (1905-1958), his life and work and his marriage to Ethel Mannin (1900-1984)* (York, Sessions, 1992).

³ Ethel Mannin, *Comrade O Comrade; or, low-down on the Left* (London, Jarrolds, 1947), p. 5.

⁴ Mannin, *Comrade O Comrade*, p. 118. Mannin’s partner, the anti-imperialist writer Reginald Reynolds describes in his 1956 memoir - which includes a wonderful portrait of Chris Braithwaite - how this account of the meeting of minds between Goldman and Braithwaite was based on a real incident. Reginald Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes* (London, Jarrolds, 1956), pp. 153-54. In 1941, Mannin published *Red Rose*, a novel about Emma Goldman, while for more on Goldman and her meetings on the Spanish Revolution in London, see David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: left-libertarian thought and British writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2006).

⁵ The phrase ‘class struggle Pan-Africanism’ was coined by Kent Worcester. See Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James; a political biography* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 42.

⁶ Jonathan Derrick, *Africa’s ‘Agitators’: militant anti-colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (London, Hurst & Company, 2008), p. 284.

⁷ For some further discussion of why activists like Braithwaite have tended to be a little overlooked by scholars, see Christian Høgsbjerg, ‘Black Books’, *History Workshop Journal* (Vol. 70, 2010). This is a review of Carol Polsgrove’s recent important and insightful work on the Pan-Africanists around George Padmore from the 1930s to the 1950s. See Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British rule in Africa: writers in a common cause* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁸ George Padmore, ‘Chris Jones: fighter for the oppressed’, *New Leader*, September 1944, online at

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1944/chris-jones.htm>’.

⁹ On emigration from Barbados in this period, see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century America* (London, Verso, 1999), p. 30, and Mary Chamberlain, *Empire and nation-building in the Caribbean: Barbados, 1937-66* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 26-50.

¹⁰ Nancy Cunard, ‘On the coloured seamen in the Merchant Navy’, report submitted to the Ministry of Information in June 1943, p. 1, Folder 1.3, Nancy Cunard Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

¹¹ Laura Tabili, *“We Ask for British Justice”: workers and racial difference in late imperial Britain* (London, Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 3, 39.

¹² ‘The advent of war had led to a considerable increase in the number of black (lascar and British) and Chinese seamen on British ships. When war was declared, 8,000 merchant seamen joined the armed forces, while a further 9,000 nationals of now hostile countries were sacked. Black workers were among those who replaced them, particularly during 1915-17 when wages were increased and labour was recruited in the colonies themselves.’ Paul Gordon and Danny Reilly, ‘Guestworkers of the sea: racism in British shipping’, *Race & Class* (Vol. 28, No. 2, 1986), p. 75.

¹³ *New Leader*, 23 August 1941.

¹⁴ Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance; Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 222. Mannin’s partner Reginald Reynolds confirmed in his memoirs that Braithwaite, ‘of medium height, thick-set and engagingly ugly’, had ‘received very little schooling but he had seen the world in the merchant service, read a little, thought a lot and made up his mind on all major issues...’ Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, p. 118.

¹⁵ Cunard, ‘On the coloured seamen in the Merchant Navy’, p. 1.

¹⁶ Chamberlain, *Empire and nation-building in the Caribbean*, pp. 28-29. There is extensive discussion of Caribbean migration to America in James’s *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*.

¹⁷ James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, p. 71.

¹⁸ Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: race and political culture in 1930s Britain* (Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 92.

¹⁹ On Ferdinand Smith, see Gerald Horne, *Red Seas; Ferdinand Smith and radical black sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (London, New York University Press, 2005), which also discusses Mulzac, who, among other things was the author of a ‘classic work of proletarian literature’, *A Star to Steer By*. On Mulzac, see also James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, pp. 92-3. As Gerald Horne notes ‘The NMU carried forward the tradition of those black sailors who in the late eighteenth century had brought the word of insurrection in Haiti to the Deep South and southern Africa. There were NMU members in prisons from India to South Africa to Germany to Brazil as a result of participation in democratic struggles. Over eight hundred members of the NMU fought in Spain in the 1930s’. See Gerald Horne, ‘Black Thinkers at Sea: Ferdinand Smith and the decline of African American proletarian intellectuals’, *Souls* (Vol. 4, No. 2, 2002), p. 43.

²⁰ Padmore, ‘Chris Jones’.

²¹ Cunard, ‘On the coloured seamen in the Merchant Navy’, p. 1.

²² Padmore, ‘Chris Jones’. C.L.R. James in a 1975 interview with Alan MacKenzie confirmed that Braithwaite’s political radicalisation really dated from his settlement in Britain after the war. See Alan John MacKenzie, ‘British Marxists and the Empire: anti-imperialist theory and practice, 1920-1945’, (unpublished Phd thesis, University of London, 1978), p. 180.

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- ²³ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 2-3.
- ²⁴ Jacqueline Jenkins, *Black 1919; riots, racism and resistance in imperial Britain* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2009), p. 2. See also Neil Evans, ‘Across the universe: racial violence and the post-war crisis in imperial Britain, 1919-25’, *Immigrants & Minorities* (Vol. 13, Nos. 2/3, 1994). This was a special issue of the journal edited by Diane Frost on ‘Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK’.
- ²⁵ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, p. 111.
- ²⁶ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 11-12.
- ²⁷ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 3, 35, 114, 120. See also Tony Lane, ‘The political imperatives of bureaucracy and empire: the case of the Coloured Alien Seamen Order, 1925’, *Immigrants & Minorities* (Vol. 13, Nos. 2/3, 1994).
- ²⁸ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 140, 144. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, p. 222.
- ²⁹ See Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, p. 51.
- ³⁰ Baruch Hirson and Lorraine Vivian, *Strike Across the Empire; the seamen’s strike of 1925: in Britain, South Africa and Australasia* (London, Clio, 1992), p. 38. See also Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, p. 42.
- ³¹ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 84, 93.
- ³² Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen; a history of the National Union of Seamen, 1887-1987* (Oxford, Malthouse Press, 1989), p. 116.
- ³³ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 3, 55-7, 83-6. Padmore, ‘Chris Jones’.
- ³⁴ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 101-2. In 1929 ‘a petition from “several coloured members of the Union in London” solicited the appointment of “a coloured delegate ... to look after their interests”’. It seems almost certain Braithwaite was involved in this petition.
- ³⁵ Chris Jones, ‘Problems of coloured seamen’, *International African Opinion* (Vol. 1, No. 1, July, 1938).
- ³⁶ Padmore, ‘Chris Jones’. We do not know, for example, whether he had any connection to the short-lived National African Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union (NASFU), based in Liverpool during the early 1920s, or how much of the rank-and-file seamen’s militancy – which included an international wildcat strike in summer 1925 against a union-sanctioned pay cut – he took part in. On these, see Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 97, 157; Hirson and Vivian, *Strike Across the Empire*.
- ³⁷ Letter dated 16 July 1939 from Chris Braithwaite to the NUS Temporary Management Committee, Warwick Modern Records Centre: MSS 175/328. Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, p. 81.
- ³⁸ Letter dated 16 July 1939 from Braithwaite to the NUS Temporary Management Committee.
- ³⁹ Tabili, “*We Ask for British Justice*”, pp. 82, 102-3.
- ⁴⁰ Marika Sherwood, ‘The Comintern, the CPGB, colonies and black Britons, 1920-1938’, *Science and Society* (Vol. 60, No. 2, 1996), p. 152. For more context on the Communist International and its work among colonial seamen in this period, see Hakim Adi, ‘The Comintern and black workers in Britain and France 1919-37’, *Immigrants & Minorities* (Vol. 28, Nos. 2/3, 2010). On the Profintern, see Reiner Tosstorff’s massive history Profintern, unfortunately only available in German but reviewed by Ian Birchall in *Historical Materialism* (Vol. 17, 2009).
- ⁴¹ Sherwood, ‘The Comintern, the CPGB, colonies and black Britons’, p. 153.

⁴² Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics; The left and the end of empire, 1918-1964* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 86, quoting a 'Secret Report on Communist Party Activities in Great Britain among Colonials' submitted to the Colonial Office by Superintendent E. Pargett on 22 April 1930.

⁴³ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London: KV 2/1102/73a.

⁴⁴ George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years; memories of the fight for freedom on five continents* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1956), p. 215. On Hardy, see Andrew Flinn and Kevin Morgan, 'George Hardy (1884-1966)', *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, XI, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 98-109, and see also his Special Branch file: TNA, KV2 / 1027 / 66.

⁴⁵ Sherwood, 'The Comintern, the CPGB, colonies and black Britons', pp. 154-6.

⁴⁶ See Haywood Patterson, *Scottsboro Boy* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1951), and James A. Millar, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhalt, 'Mother Ada Wright and the international campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934', *American Historical Review* (Vol. 106, No. 2, 2001).

⁴⁷ Padmore, 'Chris Jones'.

⁴⁸ *New Leader*, 23 August 1941.

⁴⁹ Sherwood, 'The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and black Britons', p. 155.

⁵⁰ *Negro Worker* (Vol. 2, No. 5, May 1932). See also James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary; George Padmore's path from communism to Pan-Africanism* (London, Pall Mall Press, 1967), p. 26.

⁵¹ Sherwood, 'The Comintern, the CPGB, colonies and black Britons', p. 158. In July 1933, Braithwaite would address a Scottsboro Defence Committee musical gala at London's Phoenix theatre. See Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, p. 49.

⁵² *Negro Worker* (Vol. 2, No. 8, August 1932).

⁵³ Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class; The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London, I.B. Taurus, 2002), p. 227. On Ward and the NWA, see Hakim Adi, 'The Negro Question: The Communist International and Black Liberation in the Interwar Years', in Michael O. West, William G. Martin and Fanon Che Wilkins (eds), *From Toussaint to Tupac: the black international since the age of revolution* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 167-8, 172.

⁵⁴ Ward was described by Special Branch in 1938 as being 'one of the principal negro agitators in the UK' since 1930. TNA, CO 295/606/4. For more on Ward, see the numerous references in Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 28 November 1932.

⁵⁶ Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators'*, pp. 283-4. Both resigned after an apparent disagreement with Reginald Bridgeman, secretary of the League Against Imperialism.

⁵⁷ Anne Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981), p. 281. In undated correspondence with George Padmore's partner, Dorothy Pizer, Cunard would later recall Braithwaite and Jim Headley as both 'magnificently intelligent and capable as well as very good men'. See Maroula Joannou, 'Nancy Cunard's English Journey', *Feminist Review* (No. 78, 2004), p. 148.

⁵⁸ Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators'*, p. 284.

⁵⁹ MacKenzie, 'British Marxists and the Empire', p. 180.

⁶⁰ Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, p. 85.

⁶¹ Quoted in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London, Rivers Oram Press, 2007), pp. 216-217.

⁶² Braithwaite remained in contact with Padmore and Cunard, though by 1934 both were now based in France. See Cunard's letter to the Nigerian nationalist leader Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1934, when the latter passed through London that summer. 'Hope you will meet Chris Jones by now; make him take you to the docks where he works. A remarkable place. And he will also show you Walker's Café...unique of its kind.' Quoted in Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey; an autobiography* (London, C. Hurst, 1970), p. 197.

⁶³ His political work aside, Braithwaite also seems to have undertaken important and overlooked cultural - or perhaps 'counter-cultural' - work from the mid-1930s onwards, helping George Padmore and Amy Ashwood Garvey recruit black colonial seamen, particularly Africans, to play roles as extras when necessary on the British stage and screen, though there is no record of him appearing in any productions himself. On the importance of black colonial seamen for many stage and screen productions during the inter-war period, see Marie Seton, Paul Robeson (London, Dennis Dobson, 1958), pp. 38, 77, 99-100.

⁶⁴ Tabili, "*We Ask for British Justice*", pp. 78, 82.

⁶⁵ *Negro Worker* (Vol. 5, No. 9, September 1935).

⁶⁶ Marika Sherwood, 'Lascar struggles against discrimination in Britain 1923-45: The work of N.J. Upadhyaya and Surat Alley', *The Mariner's Mirror* (Vol. 90, No. 4, November 2004), p. 443.

⁶⁷ See Hannen Swaffer's article in the *Daily Herald*, 24 August 1935. See also TNA, KV/2/1824/7a. See also Daniel Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-6* (London, Temple Smith, 1975), p. 115.

⁶⁸ Matthew Quest, 'George Padmore's and C.L.R. James's International African Opinion', in Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis (eds.), *George Padmore: Pan-African revolutionary* (Kingston, Jamaica, Ian Randle, 2009), p. 122.

⁶⁹ 'Colonial Seamen warn Fascists', *Daily Worker*, 3 September 1935.

⁷⁰ Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, p. 222. The daughter of Braithwaite in question was Pamela.

⁷¹ *The Times*, 4 June 1936. For more on the remarkable scenes on Haile Selassie's arrival, see *Time*, 15 June 1936. The *Manchester Guardian* noted 'bright red banners were upheld by the Friends of Abyssinia organisation, and people were wearing amulets or enamelled badges in the Abyssinian colours or waving small Abyssinian flags. Many coloured people were in the crowd...' Indeed, 'there was no red carpet on the platform, no festoons of flowers, no Cabinet ministers, no guard of honour, but there can seldom have been an occasion when the arrival of a foreign monarch so stirred the hearts'. *Manchester Guardian*, 4 June 1936. The CSA was part of a delegation representing the black community of Britain which was spurned when it planned a welcome reception by Haile Selassie I. See Robert A. Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. X; Africa for the Africans, 1923-1945* (London, University of California Press, 2006), pp. 629-630.

⁷² Tabili, "*We Ask for British Justice*", p. 159. *Negro Worker* (Vol. 7, No. 2, February 1937).

⁷³ Sherwood, 'Lascar struggles against discrimination in Britain', p. 443.

⁷⁴ *The Keys* (Vol. 4, No. 3, January-March, 1937).

⁷⁵ Chris Jones, 'Britain's coloured seamen', *The Keys* (Vol. 5, No. 1, July-September, 1937).

⁷⁶ Sherwood, 'Lascar struggles against discrimination in Britain', p. 443.

⁷⁷ Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism From Within* (London, 1973), pp. x, 129. Makonnen seems to have confused the name of Braithwaite's Colonial Seamen's Association with the Coloured Colonial

Seamen's Union which existed in Cardiff around Harry O'Connell, an activist also like Makonnen originally from British Guiana. On O'Connell, see Marika Sherwood, 'Racism and resistance: Cardiff in the 1930s and 1940s', *Llafur* (Vol. 5, No. 4, 1991), pp. 60-1.

⁷⁸ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power; the history of black people in Britain* (London, Pluto, 1987), pp. 341, 345.

⁷⁹ *Africa and the World* (Vol. 1, No. 4, September 1937), and Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, p. 53. For more on the IASB and the Caribbean Labour Rebellions, see Christian Høgsbjerg, "'A Thorn in the Side of Great Britain': C.L.R. James and the Caribbean Labour Rebellions of the 1930s", *Small Axe* (No. 35, July 2011).

⁸⁰ See for example the CSA meeting held on 14 March 1938, mentioned in TNA, CO 295/606/4.

⁸¹ By May 1938, the CPGB had retreated from offering British colonies independence and were merely committed to supporting interim democratic charter rights. See the May 1938 CPGB statement 'Peace and the Colonial Question', discussed in Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India; metropolitan anti-imperialism, 1885-1947* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 244.

⁸² M.A.R.H.O. (ed.), *Visions of History* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 269.

⁸³ Socialist Platform, *C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism; an interview* (London, Socialist Platform, 1987), p. 6. For a dramatic account of perhaps the most heroic and famous 'revolution at the back of the hall' ever made by Chris Braithwaite, at the thousand-strong conference in London on 'Peace and Empire' organised by the India League and the London Federation of Peace Councils in mid-July 1938, see Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, pp. 118-120.

⁸⁴ C.L.R. James, 'Notes on the life of George Padmore [c.1960]', p. 36. This is an unpublished manuscript, a copy of which is available at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London. As James later recalled of Braithwaite's interventions at CPGB meetings, 'he would intervene and say: "You say that the bourgeoisie in India can make the revolution, but I have been in the Party and you have said that this was impossible. Comrade James, you have the document. Read out what they used to say". I always kept the documents with me ...' See MacKenzie, 'British Marxists and the Empire', p. 236.

⁸⁵ See for example Orwell's famous article 'Not counting niggers' in *The Adelphi* in July 1939, republished as George Orwell, 'Review of *Union Now* by Clarence K. Streit', in Peter Davison (ed.), *The complete works of George Orwell*, Vol. 11 (London, Secker & Warburg, 1998).

⁸⁶ Interview with the late Len Edmondson on 21 May 1999, Beamish Museum, p 26. See the Len Edmondson papers, Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Newcastle, 4707/4a.

⁸⁷ Chris Jones, 'Coloured seamen', *International African Opinion* (Vol. 1, No. 2, August 1938).

⁸⁸ Quest, 'George Padmore's and C.L.R. James's *International African Opinion*', pp. 121-122.

⁸⁹ Chris Jones, 'Seamen's Notes', *International African Opinion*, (Vol. 1, No. 6, February-March 1939).

⁹⁰ Socialist Platform, *C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism*, p. 6.

⁹¹ C.L.R. James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (London, F.A.C.T., 1938), p. 83.

⁹² Joannou, 'Nancy Cunard's English Journey', pp. 153-4. As Cunard wrote, 'to these men from West Africa and the West Indies is due their full measure of national thanks. They have been to every one of the maritime war-zones and many have taken conveyances to the Soviet Union where they have seen something of the rhythm of life of our great Russian ally.' On some of the class struggles of black seamen during the early 1940s, see Marika Sherwood, 'Strikes! African seamen, Elder Dempster and the government 1940-42', *Immigrants & Minorities* (Vol. 13, Nos. 2/3, 1994).

⁹³ Cunard, 'On the coloured seamen in the Merchant Navy', p. 1.

⁹⁴ New Leader, 26 January 1940. Further testament to Braithwaite's war-time activism comes from another notice in the New Leader, noting that on 26 February 1943, he was billed to speak on 'Colonial Blacks on the move', at the anarchist-run Freedom Press Rooms on 27 Belsize Road in London. See New Leader, 6 February 1943.

⁹⁵ 'Two Negro Leaders', New Leader, 23 August 1941. On EN Mackenzie, see Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood (eds.), *The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress Revisited* (London, New Beacon Books, 1995), p. 141.

⁹⁶ Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, p. 222. Padmore, 'Chris Jones'. Letter from Ambassador Subasinghe to James R. Hooker in 1964, quoted in Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, p. 77.

⁹⁷ On the relief efforts for Braithwaite's children, see Reynolds, *My Life and Crimes*, pp. 120-1, Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism From Within*, p. 148, Ethel Mannin, 'Our debt to Chris Jones', *New Leader*, 10 February 1945, *New Leader*, 24 February 1945, *New Leader*, 10 March 1945, *Socialist Leader*, 30 November 1946, and 'Chris Jones', *Socialist Leader*, 26 August 1950, the latter of which includes a photograph of two of his daughters. Braithwaite's youngest son, Reginald George, took his name after Reynolds and Padmore. See Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, p. 77, and Huxter, *Reg and Ethel*, p. 79.

⁹⁸ John McNair, 'The Late Chris Jones', *New Leader*, 2 December 1944.

⁹⁹ Tabili, "*We Ask for British Justice*", p. 81.

¹⁰⁰ Horne, 'Black Thinkers at Sea', p. 40. Those at the Pan-African Congress who had once worked at sea included Peter Abrahams (South Africa), Surat Alley (India), M.I. Faro (Nigeria), Rupert Gittens (Trinidad), I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson (Sierra Leone), J.M. King (Barbados), Ras T. Makonnen (Guyana), Ernest Marke (Sierra Leone), George Nelson (Ghana) and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana). See Adi and Sherwood (eds.), *The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress Revisited*.

¹⁰¹ Padmore, 'Chris Jones'.

¹⁰² C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways; The story of Herman Melville and the world we live in* (London, University Press of New England, 2001), p. 17. The passage can be found in *Moby Dick*, Chapter 26, 'Knights and Squires'.