

**Title—Citizenship and Immigration in Postwar Britain**

**Author—Randall Hansen**

**Year—2000**

Categories: Immigration, Colonialism, Politics

Place: Britain

Time: 1945-1980

Argument Synopsis:

Hansen's *Citizenship and Immigration in Postwar Britain* aims to account for the transformation, since 1945, of the United Kingdom from a homogenous to multicultural society. Hansen takes issue with the dominant argument regarding British immigration policy in the twentieth century and characterizes his book as a corrective. The dominant argument claims that British politicians and civil servants were unanimous in their hostility to Black immigration and that this hostility intimately shaped British immigration. These politicians undertook the task of reconstructing conceptions of British nationality and belonging along racist lines, and then used this racialized conception of British-ness as the pretense for unnecessary immigration controls. Hansen posits that this argument is sloppy and inadequate, and he seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation. To do so, Hansen focuses on three features of British nationality and immigration policy: 1) its exceptional liberality and expansiveness from 1948 until 1962 2) its rapid reversal after 1962, becoming one of the most restrictive immigration regimes in the Western world and 3) a series of interrelated and unexplained outcomes. These outcomes include: the decision to create an imperial citizenship scheme for 800,000 British subjects in 1948, the deferral of distinctive British citizenship until 1981, the reviled and misunderstood concept of 'partiality' and a series of domestic political crises engendered by the expulsion of Asians from East Africa.

Hansen is a political scientist, not a historian, and he perceives the audience of this book to be scholars of commonwealth migration, comparativists interested in migration, and students of contemporary British history. Hansen traces, using both primary sources and elite interviews, the development of Commonwealth immigration and policies towards it over the four decades covered in the book, roughly from 1945 until the early 1980s. His focus is explicitly on the policy-making apparatus of the British. While he acknowledges the need for a social history of Commonwealth migrants, that is not his focus for this book. Overall, his book is about the enactment of a series of public policies that led to a multicultural Britain that few would have predicted, or wanted, at the end of the Second World War. In 1945 Britain had a non-white population of around 30,000 people and that number had ballooned to almost 3 million by the close of the twentieth century. It has among the largest ethnic populations in Europe, along with Germany and France, and Britain shares with France the largest ethnic-minority citizens. He argues against the received wisdom that postwar immigration was based on economic need, but shaped by official racism. Hansen claims that official and politicians were, on the whole, more liberal than the public in terms of immigration and whatever racism resulted from the series of immigration and nationality legislation was not intended. The argument is interesting but gives far too much credit to the government.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Racism did not unilaterally drive immigration policy changes
- British politicians and civil servants were more liberal than the public when it came to postwar immigration
- British immigration policy was exceptionally expansive until 1962 when it became one of the most restrictive immigration regimes in the West