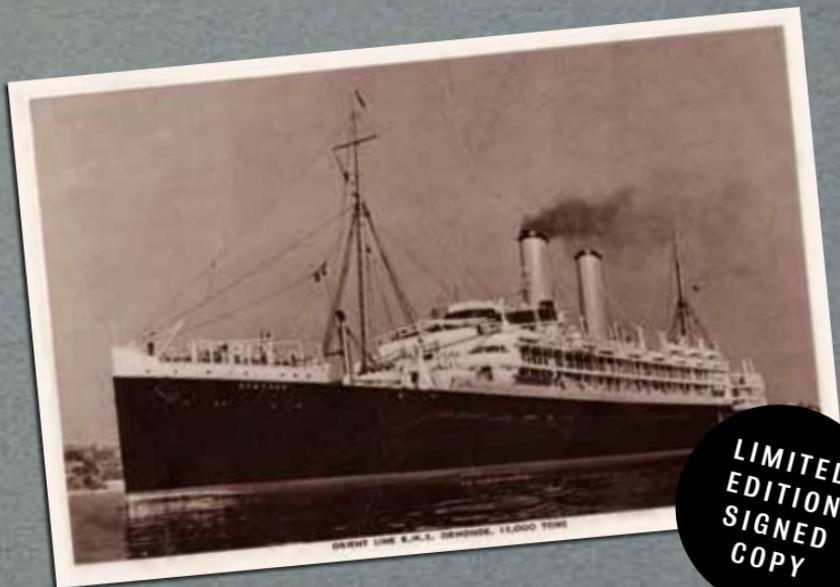


– WINDRUSH'S FORGOTTEN FORERUNNER –

# ORMONDE

BY HANNAH LOWE

– NEXT GENERATION POET 2014 –



LIMITED  
EDITION  
SIGNED  
COPY

INTRODUCTION BY MIKE PHILLIPS

Many people have heard of the *Windrush*, and many assume it was the first vessel to bring immigrants from Jamaica to the UK. Hannah Lowe's *Ormonde* aims to address this error: by bringing together a cycle of poems and unique personal and historical documentary archives, Lowe tells the story of the 1947 journey of the *Ormonde*, which carried pioneering Jamaican immigrants over a year before the *Windrush*. On board was the author's father, ready to start a new life in a new country. His daughter writes poignantly of his hopes and aspirations, of his fellow passengers, and the issues faced by immigrants arriving in Britain at the time. Lowe's book reinstates this important and neglected chapter in our cultural memory.

# ORMONDE

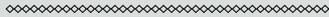
BY HANNAH LOWE

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This edition is limited  
to 300 signed & numbered  
copies, of which this is  
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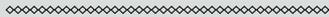
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**HANNAH LOWE** was born in Ilford, Essex, in 1976, to an English mother and a Chinese/Jamaican father. She has a BA in American Literature from the University of Sussex as well as a Masters degree in Refugee Studies, and is currently working towards a PhD in Creative Writing at Newcastle University. Her widely praised pamphlet *The Hitcher* was published by The Rialto in 2011. *Chick*, her first full collection, came out from Bloodaxe in 2013, and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize, and the Seamus Heaney Prize for First Collection. She has also published *Rx* (sine wave peak, 2013), a pamphlet of love poems. Her family memoir *Long Time No See* will be published by Periscope in Spring 2015. She is a teaching fellow in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University.



**DR MIKE PHILLIPS**, OBE, FRSL, FRSA, has worked as a journalist and broadcaster for the BBC, as a lecturer in media studies at the University of Westminster, as Cross Cultural Curator at Tate Britain, and as Acting Director of Arts in Tilburg, Netherlands. He was awarded the Arts Foundation Fellowship in 1996 for his crime fiction (featuring black journalist Sam Dean), and the OBE in 2007 for services to broadcasting. He is the co-author of *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1998), which accompanied a BBC television series, and the author of *London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain* (2001).



'What I know' was originally published in the *Morning Star*, and 'In' in *In* magazine

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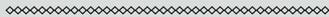


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QUOTE SOURCES (where not fully stated on the page): **p14:** 'The Waking', from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Anchor Books, 1975) **p16:** 'Limbo', from *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* by Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Oxford University Press, 1973) **p19:** The National Archives, ref. BT26/1223 **p34:** Stuart Hall, from 'Reconstruction Work: Images of Postwar Black Settlement' (1984), in *Writing Black Britain 1948–1998*, ed. James Proctor (Manchester University Press, 2000) **p34:** Crich Area Community News, www.cacn.org.uk

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# INTRODUCTION

BY MIKE PHILLIPS

This collection of poems about the *Ormonde* is prompted by Hannah Lowe's memories of her father, but equally, as you read them, this act of remembering becomes something more than a memorial. Instead, the poems begin to thrust themselves into our understanding of our history, announcing and reconstructing the epic moments of our migration.

*Wind back the hours, the days and months, a year –  
and out of fog, Ormonde sails like a rumour,  
or a tale about how what's too soon forgotten  
will rise again – light up, awaken engines,  
swing her bow through half a century,  
return a hundred drifters, lost-at-sea.  
(from 'Ormonde')*

Appropriately, these poems also bring back to me many of the things I had forgotten about that period. This was a time when everyone I knew from the Caribbean had come to England on one boat or the other – and I remember a crowd of boys and girls, who I had known

• *Detail from a postcard of the Ormonde –  
known at various points in its history as  
SS, RMS, HMS and HMT Ormonde.*

**Hannah Lowe's poems recover the individual identity of the passengers who sailed on the Ormonde, but they do much more.**

since I was born, and who I would never see again, lining the narrow street of white marl and sea shells to wave me goodbye, and I remember walking through the wharf, huge and gloomy, with the sickly perfume of sugar, so strong it almost choked me, and I remember the feel of the boat rocking, prelude to sickness and oblivion.

The process is one I also remember from the time when I began writing about the arrival of the *Windrush* over a year after the *Ormonde*. Individual reminiscences join a multitude of others, and segue into the river of remembering from which history is assembled. In some respects this is the point of the collection. It begins with a 'rewind' back to the *Ormonde*, and goes on to memorialise the individuals who sailed on her – seamen, stowaways, schoolboy, dressmaker, boxer – all of them rehearsing the byways that had

**This is a journey which has become a symbol of Caribbean migration ... the 'Windrush generation' is a reference to all those early pioneers who travelled by boat, before the sixties decade of big jets.**

brought them to this point. Later comes the poem 'In', which describes the moments that come after arrival:

*In the labour queue, ten men ahead the same as you  
— you're in, you're  
in, no, no, some other fellow's in, new worry rising  
like a wind  
In the glass, a thinner picture of your face  
In your dreams, a yuka moth, a shell, the sea*

This is soon followed by 'Shipbreaking' which centres on the breaking up of the *Ormonde*, and the recovery of its memories:

*... Now my mind replays  
a fizzing cine-film: the young man on a gangway —  
his trilby tilted, pocket hankie, stride  
rehearsed — it says I'm here.*

So far, so good. In the years since I began writing about the *Windrush*, this is a journey which has become a symbol of Caribbean migration, and an icon for Britain's black community. Conceived in three parts,

departure, journey and arrival, the story has taken on the quality of an epic myth, which serves as a comprehensive account explaining our origins, our presence, and the nature of our experience in Britain.

Each generation of Caribbean writer has, therefore, been nourished and inspired by it, building and rebuilding the story in line with their own preoccupations and those of their contemporaries — George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Derek Walcott, Louise Bennett, James Berry — the list could go on. In that sense, the 'Windrush generation' is a reference to all those early pioneers who travelled by boat, before the sixties decade of big jets. The story of the *Windrush* ended and closed the circle, ended and closed the moment in which the boats sailed out of the mist and into the fog of Britain's coastline.

Hannah Lowe's poems recover the individual identity of the passengers who sailed on the



⋮ Postcard of the  
⋮ Empire Windrush.

*Ormonde*, but they do much more. She's not bringing us memories, because the actual memories, where they exist, are frozen in time and subject to endless accretions, additions, speculations, hints. As the poet herself says: "All I can do is emphasise that this is a work is work of fiction, with its origins in fact."

Separated by almost seventy years from the event, her task is less to do with reconstructing memory, and more to do with constructing a species of memorial. Compare Lamming's *The Emigrants* from 1954, a novel which highlights language and customary behaviour in a kind of reportage about what was going on around him. Unlike Lamming or Salkey, Lowe writes from the other end of the experience they began to map. She knows the future of her characters. She's writing it:

*and I recall that old trunk in our attic —  
cracked leather, rusted clasps — my box of tricks  
you said, you said you'd lost the only key.*

*Your home, the ship you sailed, those miles of sea  
were locked inside.  
(from 'Shipbreaking')*

This collection, however, reminds us that the "old trunk" contains both a story of remarkable potency, and a link to the experience and identity of migrants and movements in the present day:

*and when, at last, the docks on England's rim  
rose up, what choice had we but to jump and swim?  
(from 'Stowaway')*

History, as always, repeats itself. Migrants of today and tomorrow, from wherever they come, are currently going through an experience very similar to that which Hannah Lowe's dad understood to be inevitable.

*They tore the Ormonde up in '52  
for scrap. I google what I can. If you  
were here, you'd ask me why I care so much.  
I'd say it's what we do these days Dad, clutch  
at history.  
(from 'Shipbreaking')*

# THE OTHER SHIP

BY HANNAH LOWE

The poems in this collection are about the passengers on the ex-troopship *Ormonde*, which sailed from the Caribbean to Liverpool in March 1947. The poems are works of imagination, but their genesis comes from the archive material included here – the passenger list, photographs, newspaper articles, and also from the notebook of my father, Ralph Lowe (usually known as Chick). This is my personal connection to the *Ormonde* – my dad was a passenger on that voyage. As a young man, he travelled in cabin class, listing his destination address – like many of the other men on board – as care of the Colonial Service Club on Wimpole Street in London. Seeing his name on the passenger list was a moment of wonder to me. It cemented the scant details I had about his early life and suddenly furnished my mind's narrative – I could see him stepping onto the ship, I could see him stepping off. So a few of these poems are about my father, or a man like him at least, making that journey.

I first read of the *Ormonde* in the notebook I found years after my dad's death. In it, he describes his early years growing up in rural Jamaica – a life of hardship and lack of opportunities. He was a teenager when the Second World War began. The island's poverty became worse. There were few jobs. He had no family to rely on. The notebook closes with his description of his decision to leave Jamaica:

**For the first time I realised that my father was part of the 'Windrush Generation' – a group who were to become characterised as stalwart pioneers.**

*"My thoughts turned to immigration as a way out of my predicament. I had been hearing from people that it was easy to get to England, so I started to make inquiries as to how I could get there. I soon found out that you could book a passage on ships bringing back servicemen who had fought in the Second World War. So I duly booked my passage on the SS Ormonde paying the princely sum of £28."*

Once I knew its name, I looked for more references to the *Ormonde*, but came across surprisingly little information. It took me a while to work out that *Ormonde* was actually the first ship to travel from the Caribbean to Britain in the postwar period – over a year before *Empire Windrush*. It became fascinating

Notes written in the 1980s by the author's father, describing his decision to book passage on *Ormonde*:  
"On board the ship was a small batch of the first immigrants to leave Jamaica for England..."

started in 1946.

Started seeing the  
sawed in the green  
about, of the people  
of our contract.  
I decided to deduct a  
from post office  
on terms was a lot of  
over. it did not  
get rid of most  
at eggs  
the shirts, I was  
so, with no job, and

arrived in America to  
made pregnant, and  
going to America. But  
which I will mention  
lead to immigration as a  
prisonment,

I had been hearing from people that it  
was easy to get to England.  
So I started to make inquiries as to  
how I could get there.  
I soon found out you could book  
a passage on ships bringing back  
servicemen who had fought in the  
second world war. So I duly booked  
my passage on the SS Ormonde  
paying the princely sum of £28  
to get to England.

My mother, Nelson, my sister  
and several other relatives came  
down to the boat to see me off.  
On board the ship was a small  
batch of the first immigrants to leave  
Jamaica for England – which as  
one knows, became a flood  
and in the end required a  
in the immigration laws to set  
flood.

**How it is this voyage has largely been forgotten? What happened to the passengers on the *Ormonde*? In all my research I've not personally come across anyone, aside from my dad, who travelled on the ship.**

that *Ormonde* had almost disappeared from history and memory. How is it that this voyage has largely been forgotten? What happened to the passengers on *Ormonde*? In all my research I've not personally come across anyone, aside from my dad, who travelled on the ship. I placed an advert in the *Liverpool Echo*, looking for any other passengers on that voyage and asking them to get in touch, but heard nothing back.

I decided to write poems about the *Ormonde* when I finally saw the passenger list at the National Archives in London. My mother had remembered that my father was befriended by two boxers on the journey, who had offered to share their lodgings with him. How strange and wonderful it was to discover their names – S.A. Allen and F. Thompson – on the list. Further scrutiny revealed the presence of a nine-year-old boy in cabin class, and of women, albeit few, who embarked on the journey from Jamaica – as well as the eleven stowaways and six 'distressed seamen' who caught a ride home.

In writing the poems I've called upon not only the scant detail I have about the *Ormonde*, but also on the broader historical information

about this time. There is a lot to draw on, as the tale of postwar Caribbean migration has become more widely known since 1998, when the 50th anniversary of the arrival of *Empire Windrush* was marked. Images and footage of that ship docking at Tilbury appeared in the newspapers and on television. The phrase 'Windrush Years' entered the nation's vocabulary, and for the first time I realised that my father was part of that 'Windrush Generation' – the group who were to become characterised as stalwart pioneers, travelling to Britain, their mother country, full of hope and determination. I've also looked to other writers who have taken the Caribbean and migration as their themes. James Berry's *Windrush Songs* has been an influence, as have Sam Selvon's short stories from *Ways of Sunlight*, and Derek Walcott's heart-breaking poem 'The Schooner *Flight*', about the narrator Shabine's escape from his difficult island existence to a life at sea.

I wanted some of my poems to have a filmic quality, to reflect the Pathe newsreels that have been broadcast again and again showing the arrival of *Empire Windrush*. The sequence opens with a 'public' poem which redresses



..... Fruit bowl made from Ormonde's timber, belonging to the son of the ship's surgeon.

this history – the voice is somewhere between that of a radio broadcaster and a ship's captain. The last poem, 'Shipbreaking', is filmic too, referring to my attempts to reconstruct the (deconstructed) *Ormonde* from googling and YouTube clips. Technology has made history so much more accessible than it used to be, but its transmission is still mediated, and I'm continually aware of my distance from the historical truth of the *Ormonde*.

I had Louise Bennett's 1966 poem 'Colonization in Reverse' in mind when I wrote in the voices of the dressmaker, the schoolboy, the stowaway, the boxers: trying to express the complexity of their feelings – hope, excitement, desperation – and how they might have imagined their impact on Britain and vice versa. In response to these, the poem 'In' takes arrival as its theme. I wanted to repeat and thus estrange that word – 'in' – to illustrate how you can be physically in a place, but still excluded from it.

In many of the poems I use iambic couplets. There are various reasons for this: one is my belief in the possibilities of tight formal constraint to invoke creativity. In the words of George Szirtes, "the constraints of form are

... the chief producers of imagination", and certainly I needed help to write in other voices. I also wanted to both mimic and subvert the formal English metrical poetry that was taught in Caribbean classrooms under the colonial education system. As an old man, my father could still recite the Wordsworth and Kipling he'd been given at school – poems which had no relation to his life and experience. Why not have some of the *Ormonde*'s passengers speak in those formal ways of their own lives? Simultaneously, I have been preoccupied with the politics of speaking on behalf of others. I feel my dad would have given me his blessing, but how can I be sure of others? It is an unresolved concern. All I can do is emphasise that this is a work of fiction, with its origins in fact.

My research into the *Ormonde* has led me in interesting directions. An online obituary of the ship's wartime surgeon – Dr Twist – led me to discover that a number of fruit bowls had been made from the wood of the ship. A photograph of one was kindly sent to me by the surgeon's son, who has it in his possession. It is reproduced above. History comes back to us in all kinds of ways.

## Ormonde

Rewind, rewind the *Windrush!* Raise the anchor and sail her back, three weeks across the water, then let the travellers disembark, return them to their silent beds at dawn, before the mayhem of the docks at Kingston Town and Port of Spain – they'll wake to see their islands' sun again.

Wind back the hours, the days and months, a year – and out of fog, *Ormonde* sails like a rumour, or a tale about how what's too soon forgotten will rise again – light up, awaken engines, swing her bow through half a century, return a hundred drifters, lost-at-sea.

Among the crowd, here's Gilbert Lowe, a tailor, strolling starboard with his wife and daughter, or staring out to sea alone most nights, here's Paul the Carpenter, the yellow moonlight and his battered playing cards for company, or curled like woodlice in the clammy canopy

of darkness under deck, those stowaways who'll leap for Liverpool on landing day and sprint a half a mile of stormy water black with mud, to climb the slimy timber below the Albert Dock, where policemen wait to haul them off before the magistrate,

and all the passengers step from the ship and through a coverlet of mist, then slip like whispers into tenements and backstreets as *Ormonde's* deep horn bellows her retreat – and from this little piece of history she slowly creaks her way back out to sea

*Advertisement from The Sunday Gleaner, 2nd March 1947: "Passengers Who May Want to Travel on H.M.T. Ormonde. The Following Press Release has been made by the Secretariat: Persons awaiting direct sea transport to the United Kingdom who would wish to avail themselves of passages on the HMT "Ormonde" ... are asked to register their names with the Office Superintendent at the Secretariat, Kingston before the 5th of March, 1947 ... the amount normally charged for passages in Troopships is in the vicinity of £48 ... the probabilities are that it will be necessary for such persons to remain in the United Kingdom for an indefinite period while awaiting return passages."*

THE SUNDAY GLEANER, MARCH 2, 1947.

### Passengers Who May Want To Travel On H.M.T. Ormonde

The following Press Release has been made by the Secretariat:

Persons awaiting direct sea transport to the United Kingdom who would wish to avail themselves of passages by HMT "Ormonde", should it be possible to arrange for this vessel to call at Jamaica about the middle of March, are asked to register their names with the Office Superintendent at the Secretariat, Kingston before the 5th of March, 1947.

2. No information in respect to the cost of passages is yet available, but the amount normally charged for passages in Troopships is in the vicinity of £48.

3. It is, however, necessary to warn intending travellers to the United Kingdom that no guarantee whatever can be given as to a date on which return passages can be provided, and that the probabilities are that it will be necessary for such persons to remain in the United Kingdom for an indefinite period while awaiting return passages.

## What I Know

*This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
What falls away is always. And is near.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.*

— from 'The Waking' by Theodore Roethke

At night, you find me at the oil-lamp, dice in hand.  
I say to myself, if I throw a pair of fives  
I'll give up this life – the hot slow days  
of hurricanes, sweet reek of banana rot,  
black fruit on the vine. I want another hand  
of chances. I grip the dice and blow  
a gust of luck into my fist. I'm dreaming  
of England, yes, work, yes, women, riches.  
I shake these bone cubes hard, let go.  
This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

The radio fizzes news across the tenement yard –  
dazed soldiers sailing home, a weekend cavalcade,  
monsoon time coming. I pass dead horses  
in the field, dead mules. Men sag like slack suits  
in the square. Talk of leaving starts like rain,  
slow and spare, a rattle in a can. My tears  
aren't for the ship, new places, strange people,  
but the loss of my *always* faces – I mean,  
my people, who I know, my places. My sister says  
you carry them with you, don't fear.  
What falls away is always, and is near.

Footnote in Bloody  
Foreigners by Robert  
Winder (Little, Brown,  
2004, p347): "The  
Windrush was not actually  
the first ship in this story.  
In late 1947, a ship called  
the Ormonde brought  
108 migrant workers on  
the same route without  
generating a comparable  
bow-wave of concern."

*Ormonde* rocks steady across the ocean.

You ever look out to sea, and on every side  
is sky and water, too much too blue?

Thoughts lap at me like waves against the bow,  
not where am I, but why and who?

At night, we use our hours up, ten fellows  
flocked to someone's sticky room. I roll the dice  
or deal for chemmy, brag, pontoon.

We go til dawn, a huddle at the lamp turned low.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Some fellow swore there were diamonds  
on these streets. Look hard enough in rain  
you'll see them. I squint my eyes but what I see  
is sunshine on the dock, my sister's white gloves  
waving me goodbye. There's no diamonds here,  
or if there are, they're under this skin of snow.  
Seems the whole world's gone white. I roll my dice  
in basements below the English pavements.  
I guess I'm learning what I need to know.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

# Passieras

And the ship like it ready

— from 'Limbo' by Edward Kamau Brathwaite

We were losing memories already.  
They slipped like fish into the wide red water.  
My daddy's limp, that crazy bougainvillea,  
the savage rooster crowing on the fence.

A hot sea wind lulled us past Havana.  
In the dark church below deck,  
Hosco sang and played his banjo.  
We danced calypso, samba, limbo

swigged rum until a fire burnt in every one  
and we christened ourselves,  
*Passieras, Passieras,*  
drifting on the world's high curve.

We were frontiersmen, we said.  
Our god was work. What use was memory?  
Ships in the night blinked back our lights  
We glided on, eyes fixed to sea.

Entry from Ormonde's  
British passenger list,  
31st March 1947,  
regarding the author's  
father: "181. Port of  
Embarkation: Kingston.  
Port at which Passengers  
have been landed:  
Liverpool. NAMES OF  
PASSENGERS: Lowe,  
Mr. R. Class: C. AGES  
OF PASSENGERS: 22.  
Proposed address in  
United Kingdom: c/o  
Colonial Service Club,  
9 Wimpole St. W. I.  
Profession, Occupation  
or Calling of Passengers:  
Clerk. Country of  
last Permanent  
Residence: Jamaica.  
Country of Intended  
Future Permanent  
Residence: England."

P.M. 03  
19 47

LIVERPOOL

NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF BRITISH PASSENGERS

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Name of Ship	Part of Arrival	Steaming Line	Origin	Class	Age	Sex	Profession, Occupation or Calling	Country of Birth
LIVERPOOL								
177. F. of 20	Lowe	Mr. R. C.	C	28		M	a/o Barclays Bank	England (York)
178. Kingston	Lowe	Mr. R. C.	C	28		M	a/o Barclays Bank	England (York)
179. do.	Lowe	Mr. R. C.	C	27		M	Painter	Jamaica
180. do.	LITTLEMAN	Mr. T. L.	C	22		M	Builder	do.
181. do.	Lowe	Mr. R. C.	C	22		M	do	do.
182. do.	LITTLEMAN	Mr. T. L.	C	22		M	do	do.
183. do.	MAWELL	Mr. G.	C	22		M	do	do.
184. F. of 20	MCCORMICK	Mr. G. C.	C	22		M	do	do.
185. Kingston	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
186. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
187. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
188. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
189. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
190. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
191. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
192. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
193. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
194. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
195. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
196. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
197. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
198. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
199. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
200. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
201. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
202. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
203. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
204. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
205. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
206. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
207. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
208. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
209. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
210. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
211. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
212. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
213. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
214. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
215. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
216. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
217. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
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325. do.	MORGAN	Mr. A. A.	C	20		M	do	do.
326. do.	MORGAN							

## Distressed British Seamen

**Moffatt:** I knew black men at Tiger Bay and Toxteth –  
Somali skippers, seadogs from Cape Verde.  
Now these Jamaicans quiz me – *Sir, will England this,  
will England that?* Some nights they light the deck  
with music, and my old legs jig, my foot tap taps.  
Other nights, I tell them let me rest.  
I am a seaman and distressed.

**Page:** Of all the portside misses she was darkest –  
onyx black, like vinyl, like the pupil of an eye.  
She laid a trail of birdseed and I followed,  
clambering up into her nest. Seven  
days bedridden sweetest frangipani.  
Oh sail me home, I've not a penny left.  
I am a seaman and distressed.

**Hooper:** You shoulda seen the other fella. Oh, this shiner  
ain't a patch on what I done to him.  
I'll go a round or two with any boxer  
from Jamaica. I'm a British bulldog, I'm a –  
I knocked the policeman out, I slugged the jailor  
I'm the best o' British, I'm a brawler,  
I'm a seaman and distressed.

**Wiles:** What the wife will say.  
This pustule bubbles hotter every day,  
and now my palm and soles  
a'scratching like there's ants inside,  
a rashy hide across my back and chest  
I'll see an English doctor 'fore I'm dead.  
I am a seaman and distressed.

**Saeed:** I stewed a vat of octopus, four hours  
on my stove, the brine so lightly spiced  
with clove and caraway. *Saeed, they said,  
you are the best of chefs* before each sailor  
retched my *pulpo* back into the sea.  
That's it for me, my spoon is laid to rest.  
I am a seaman and distressed.

**Williams:** Let the sea gulp down this ship  
There is nothing  
to go back to

The term "Distressed  
British Seamen", or  
"DBS", refers to sailors  
who are without a ship  
in a foreign port. They  
may have lost or missed  
their vessel for various  
reasons – enemy action,  
sickness, drunkenness,  
imprisonment – or they  
may have jumped ship.  
Entry from Ormonde's  
British passenger list,  
31st March 1947:  
"Distressed British  
Seamen. PAGE Mr.  
R.J.; WILES, Mr. A.W.;  
WILLIAMS, Mr. E.;  
MOFFATT, Mr. E.;  
HOOPER, Mr. T.C.;  
SAEED, Mr. M."

## white

white as the starched shirt  
I buttoned this morning

as the blinding walk  
to Kingston docks

as the ship in port  
a dazzling arc

white as the great house  
on the red rock hill

the point of light I cling to  
as we roll away

white as the ocean foam  
as gulls who strut the deck

white as our prayers  
we pilgrims in our Sunday best

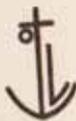
bleached cuffs and collars  
as white as dreams

white as cards we turn  
below the old white moon

the blank white faces of knaves  
and queens staring back at ours

my good white bones  
my good white teeth

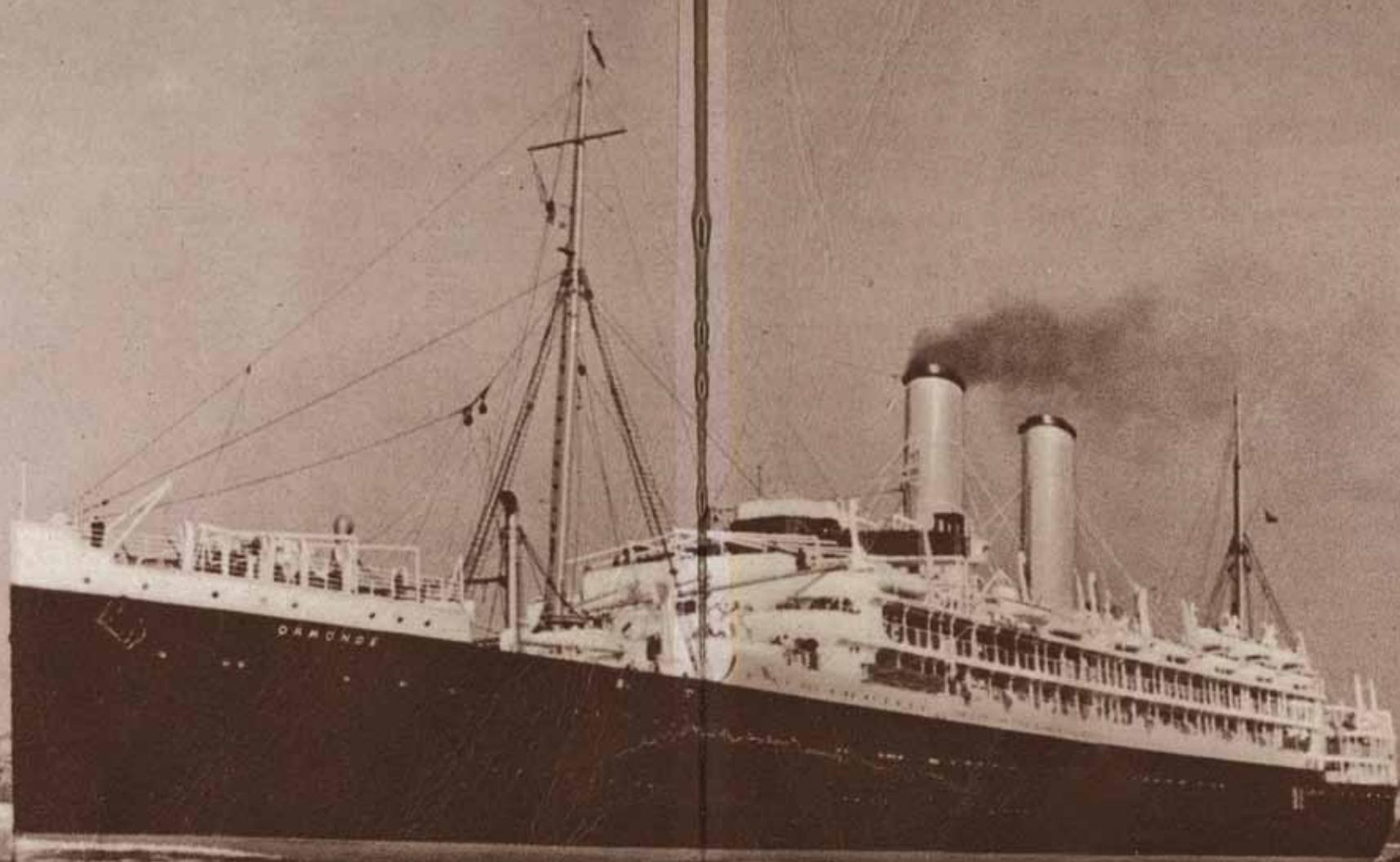
*The Ormonde was built in 1917 by John Brown, Clydebank, for the Orient Steam Navigation Co. Merchant Fleets in Profile Vol. 1 by Duncan Hawes (Patrick Stephens, 1978, p142, fig 17), which does not mention its Jamaican episode, states: "1918 June: Completed as a troopship. 1919 Nov 15: Maiden voyage to Australia. 1939: Requisitioned as a troopship. Took part in the evacuations from Norway and France. 1942 Nov: Present at the North African landings, then Sicily and Italy. 1944: Based Bombay for Far East Trooping. 1947: Returned to the Australian route as an emigrant vessel. 1952 Dec: Sold for breaking up at Dalmuir, Scotland."*



On board the  
ORIENT LINE  
S.S. "ORMONDE."

POSTCARD

For Address Only





## Schoolboy

i didn't see her  
when i said goodbye  
*no light* she said *get going chile*

gon buy a cricket bat  
in england  
shoes and school

but i don't care  
she sold my pig  
for the ticket

coughing in the yard  
to rope him  
nightdress hanging off

franky walked me  
to the harbour  
shook my hand

now it's sea sea sea  
they give me jokes and mints  
call me 27 bitten street

because she sewed it  
in my shirts in navy cotton  
before, when she could sew

someone i've never met  
will look after me  
in england

her voice whispering  
from the corner  
*say please sit still be good*

..... *One from a series of postcards sent by the author to Ormonde passengers whose names or identities she had used as the genesis for poems. All had to give a UK destination, so she sent them to these – with little hope of hearing back after 67 years. Master D Vaz was a nine-year-old boy who travelled in C class, listing his destination address as “27 Bitten Street”, and his occupation as “schoolboy”. The card was returned marked “no such address”.*

Royal Mail Mount Pleasant  
G2 9J 9QJ4 Mail Centre  
**POST CARD**



TO: 27 Bitten Street  
Liverpool

**Royal Mail**

We were unable to deliver this item because

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> addressee gone away  | <input type="checkbox"/> refused         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> address incomplete   | <input type="checkbox"/> not called for  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> address inaccessible | <input type="checkbox"/> no such address |
| <input type="checkbox"/> addressee unknown    |  |

POSTCODE:

date

initials

F346297702943

Dear Sir / Madam

I am a researcher writing a book about the SS Ormonde, a troopship from the 1940s. The passenger list names *Master D. Vaz* as living at your address in 1947. If they are still alive, or you have knowledge of them, I wonder if you might get in touch. My email address is *hannahlowe1@gmail.com*, or you could

write to Hannah Lowe, Flat *4*, ~~10~~ Road, SW2 ~~4~~

Very best wishes, Hannah *Az*

## Dressmaker

At night, I made myself a dress for England.  
All through the rainy months, I stitched by hand,  
a copper thimble on my thumb. No more  
my threadbare skirt or patched-up pinafore

By candlelight, the pattern was a map  
laid out across my bed, and as the rain's slow tap  
became a lightning storm, my scissors traced  
the pattern line – full sleeves, a gathered waist,

one tier of voile, one poplin, double-skinned  
for England's winter-time, and the cold sea-wind.  
It changed my shadowed figure on the wall.  
I dreamt myself – on a red bus passing Whitehall,

or walking on the Strand; there was a tea-room  
in which I passed my idle afternoons,  
and in every scene I wore my dress, bright red  
for pillar box and rose, the robins pictured

in my old school-books. And now, at the ship's cold rail,  
I am a jolt of colour as we sail  
closer and closer, and finally I see  
through a veil of cloud – England, my destiny.

## Boxer

brother, one week in  
your footwear's  
slipping

let's do roadwork on deck  
skip there too  
keep jumping

keep out the lounge  
at sundown  
those fellows don't

have the chances we got  
time for high-jinks  
on the other side

Mr Alexander  
paid our fare remember  
you best keep punching

I've chalked a ring  
the moon's a floodlight  
I'll be running laps

come get me  
when you're ready  
we'll go toe to toe

if you won't  
spar with me  
I'll fight my shadow

Euton Christian,  
migrant, quoted in  
Windrush: The Irresistible  
Rise of Multi-Racial  
Britain by Mike Phillips  
& Trevor Phillips  
(HarperCollins, 1998,  
p71): "They expected to  
come here and to find  
a job, to find a home.  
And in about four or  
five years, they earn  
enough money to go back.  
But a lot of people said  
that – ninety-nine out  
of a hundred say that –  
but they never achieve  
that goal . . . because  
nobody gets rich in four  
or five years anyway."

# In

In Liverpool, you walk the dock for hours  
In your bag, a box of dominoes, a pair of brogues  
In the street, a little girl tut-tuts at you  
In your belly, worry rising like the wind, but hold it boy, just hold it  
In the tenement house, a bed you swap with other men  
In shifts, you pass the afternoons  
In dreams – the rooster cawing on the fence, your sisters twisting hands, the smell  
the smell of uh  
In England, you're in England  
In the shop, a rock of last week's bread you carry home  
In snow, your slipping soles and god knows how the world went white like this  
In the street, a woman frowning, crossing over  
In your pockets, nothing but a letter, flimsy blue  
In the labour queue, ten men ahead the same as you – you're in, you're  
In, no, no, some other fellow's in, new worry rising like a wind  
In the glass, a thinner picture of your face  
In your dreams, a yuka moth, a shell, the sea  
In the back room of a pub, a cheer, the pint glass clunks just hold it boy, just  
In the makeshift ring, a shirtless man who looks like you, but *something*  
In your pocket, *something* in your pocket  
In the air, your bare fists flailing, his bare fists cracking on your ribs, your cheeks,  
your lip split  
In two, a glug of blood, your blood, oh  
In that gloomy room, a single bulb above the ring where you are sinking like a puppet  
In his arms, in his arms

.....  
Snapshot of the author's  
father, Ralph "Chick"  
Lowe, at home in England  
in the 1950s. He settled  
in London, and worked  
for the rest of his life as a  
professional gambler.  
.....



# Twist

We were all gamblers then, switching hands.  
From burning sun and yellow dust  
to blackened factories  
and the cold back rooms  
of England

I was *all in*

From crimson hurricanes that swept dead insects  
to our doors, to English rain on pavements  
you could squint at  
glittering  
the stone

That first autumn,  
the strew of leaves on Clapham Common  
took me by surprise,  
dying on the ground  
in coils of gold and red,  
the colours of my island.

Memo from Mr  
Hardman to Mr Glen,  
Ministry of Labour and  
National Service, 27th  
May 1948, discussing  
the arrival of Empire  
Windrush: "You should  
be aware of this problem.  
There is no bar to the  
entry of British Subjects  
to G.B. About 6 months  
[ago], some 150 workers  
from Jamaica came to  
G.B. apparently on their  
own initiative and at  
their own expense. They  
dispersed and no specific  
problem emerged publicly.  
Now another batch is on  
the way..."

restriction on their entry particularly when constant publicity is given to the shortage of labour in this country. The difficulty about an organised scheme of recruitment is that most industries do not take readily to colour workers and the prejudice is strongest on the workers' side.

J. B. Wilson

E. M. J.

27th May, 1948.

Mr Glen

You should be aware of this  
problem.

There is no bar to the entry  
of British Subjects into G.B. About 6 months  
ago some 150 workers from Jamaica came to G.B. apparently on their own initiative and at their own expense. They dispersed and no specific problem emerged publicly. Now another batch is on the way.

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L85100 840 JCASL4  
C644229  
(PRIORITY)  
CODE 1-348

OVER

## Shipbreaking

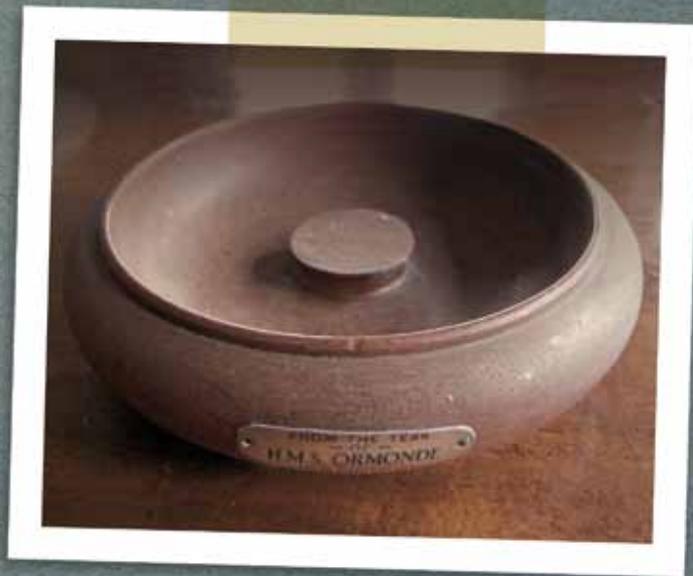
*These are not the victims of migration...*

*These folks mean to survive.*

– Stuart Hall, in *Writing Black Britain 1948–1998*

I watch old films of shipyards on the Clyde:  
cranes ripping ships apart, their metal hides  
peeled back by men in goggles wielding fire.  
The shock of innards – girders, joists and wires,  
a rusted funnel toppling in slow motion.  
Those open flanks rain down the cabin's foreign  
detritus of flags and posters, turquoise charts  
of distant oceans, photographs of sweethearts –  
They tore the *Ormonde* up in '52  
for scrap. I google what I can. If you  
were here, you'd ask me why I care so much.  
I'd say it's what we do these days Dad, clutch  
at history. I find old prints – three orphans  
on a deckchair squinting at the sun; a crewman  
with his arm around a girl, both smiling, windswept;  
a stark compartment where you might have slept  
and I recall that old trunk in our attic –  
cracked leather, rusted clasps – *my box of tricks*  
you said, you said you'd lost the only key.  
Your home, the ship you sailed, those miles of sea  
were locked inside. Now my mind replays  
a fizzing cine-film: the young man on a gangway –  
his trilby tilted, pocket hankie, stride  
rehearsed – it says *I'm here*. Then sitting dockside  
with his trunk among the rippling crowd, he lights  
a cigarette, inhales the English night.

Article in Crich Area  
Community News,  
March 2007, p15:  
*"HMS ORMONDE:  
a coincidence. In the  
obituary for Doctor Twist  
in the September issue it  
mentioned that he served  
on HMS Ormonde during  
WW2. This name rang  
a bell with Crich resident  
Mrs Hilda Turner.  
Several years ago, at a  
car boot sale, she bought  
a wooden fruit bowl made  
of teak. The inscription  
said that it had been made  
from the timbers of HMS  
Ormonde. Mrs. Turner  
had great pleasure in  
contacting Dr. Twist's  
son, Tim, to see if he  
would like the bowl as  
a memento. Tim was  
delighted to accept the kind  
offer and it now has pride  
of place in his home."*





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*"The best collaboration between these arts that I have seen since Fay Godwin and Ted Hughes' Remains of Elmet" – Ian Duhig, poet*

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*"Heart as organ, metaphor, symbol ... meanings accumulate, one poem deepening another" – Gillian Clarke, National Poet of Wales*



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## CAPTAIN'S TABLE

*Thanks to the following for their kind sponsorship:*

Elizabeth Bostock

Armando Celayo

Oliver Comins

Melissa and Michael Fox

Emer Gillespie

Hilary Custance Green

Ramona Herdman

Pamela Johnson

Fawzia Kane

Andrew Lindesay

Karen Littleton

Agnes Marton

Richard Price

Sarah Salway

Christopher Seddon

Claire Trévien

Robert Vas Dias

Lucy J. Wood

Through poems and archive material, Next Generation poet Hannah Lowe recreates the 1947 journey from Jamaica to England of her late father Ralph “Chick” Lowe and his fellow passengers on ex-troopship *Ormonde*, the forgotten forerunner of 1948’s famed migrant ship *Empire Windrush*.

“A daughter’s seemingly small quest spools imaginatively into the much larger story of migration to Britain before the SS *Windrush*. In this feat of reconstruction, Hannah Lowe repositions the long-forgotten journey of the *Ormonde* into the historic moment. A brave poetic feat and a tender, enlightening visual feast that opens up both the mind and the imagination.”

**OLIVE SENIOR**, poet and author of *Dying to Better Themselves*,  
*West Indians in the Building of the Panama Canal*

“Hannah Lowe has pulled off a remarkable feat in *Ormonde*. She has conjured a forgotten and disappearing world. Lowe has used her pen as an archaeologist’s tool to unearth and reimagine the stories behind the fantastic 1947 transatlantic voyage of the *Ormonde*, and given flesh and blood to a ghostly Caribbean cast of dreamers and romancers.”

**COLIN GRANT**, author and Associate Fellow in the Centre  
for Caribbean Studies

“The poetry of Hannah Lowe’s *Ormonde* remembers what history forgets. Beside journals and passenger lists, the poise and passion of Lowe’s poems recall a story fresh as a ship’s new paint: the story in which we still live.”

**ALISON BRACKENBURY**, poet and broadcaster



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