

## BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed Work: *Returned Exile: A Biography of George James Christian of Dominica and the Gold Coast, 1869-1940*

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Margaret D. Rouse-Jones and Estelle M. Appiah, in *Returned Exile*, skillfully give us meticulous insights into the life and works of a West Indian from a small island community, who, after his remarkable educational accomplishment in the United Kingdom, packed bag and luggage and in 1902 went to Africa in fulfillment of a desire —“to make Africa his home.”

George James Christian was born in Dominica, Eastern Caribbean, West Indies. His studies and experience at Mico Training College, where his Antigua-born father, George James Christian Senior, had schooled, had engendered an awareness of the plight of the enslaved African and of his African heritage. In 1899, at the age of 30 he set out for London to study law at Gray’s Inn, one of the four Inns of Court. There he met and associated with fellow student Henry Sylvester Williams of Trinidad, arguably the father of the Pan African Movement. In 1900 he participated in the first Pan-African conference which Williams had organized. It was on completion of his studies and soon after his call to the English bar in 1902 that he set out for the Gold Coast. There he established a legal practice within a year of his arrival with another West Indian, Francis Stanislaus Leung, who came originally from British Guiana.

In this biographical study, Rouse-Jones and Appiah take pains to elucidate how Christian used his understanding of legal systems to effect change in an African society. He was involved in a wide range of legal matters. He operated both as a prosecuting and a defence lawyer. His clients included individuals and companies, the wealthy and the indigent, chiefs and ordinary people, locals and foreigners. As a lawyer, he was also an advocate for the

reform of the judicial system in Ashanti where representation by counsel and trial by jury were not permitted, unlike the case in the Gold Coast Colony. He had a successful private practice both in Sekondi and Tarkwa and also became a “concessions” lawyer for the gold mining industry.

Christian will be remembered as a legal luminary in the Gold Coast. Among his achievements in the Gold Coast was the role he played as early as 1906 lobbying for the opening up of the Ashanti colony to legal practitioners. His behind-the-scenes participation in the circumstances which led to eventual changes in the system is illuminated in this book in the coverage of the famous trial of one Dr Benjamin Knowles. Dr Knowles was a British doctor who was convicted of the murder of his wife and sentenced to death in Kumasi without a jury and defence counsel. After the trial, Christian served as counsel and was instrumental in having the appeal brought to the Privy Council. After careful consideration of the case and the Ashanti Administration Ordinance, the conviction was overturned. As a consequence of this case, the law relating to the administration of justice in Ashanti was eventually changed.

Alongside his legal career, Christian also became increasingly involved in the political life of the community. He first served on the Sekondi Town Council and was later elected as a municipal member of the Legislative Council, a position he held until his death. His performance in the Legislative Council gave a clear indication of his commitment and contribution to Gold Coast society of the time.

Christian also lent his support to a wide range of public service activities that clearly show that he embraced life in the Gold Coast to the fullest and made valuable contributions to its legal, political and social development. Among other things, he acted as judge for the activities of the Agricultural Society, Deputy President of the Sekondi Branch of the British Red Cross Society, Visitor of Prisons, and as Chairman of the Accra Earthquake Relief Fund. He became a Freemason and is said to have been responsible for founding the St George Lodge in Sekondi. He also served as Honorary Liberian Consul for thirty years. He was responsible for the welfare of Liberians, many of whom worked on ships which frequented the Sekondi seaport.

One of the significant aspects of this book is the narration of one of the important occurrences in the Gold Coast during Christian's time: the establishment of Achimota College and School. Rouse-Jones and Appiah do not only re-tell some aspects of the story of the establishment of Achimota College and School, and the experiences of students and staff in the early days of its establishment, they—by reproducing some letters exchanged between Christian and Dr James Kwegyir Aggrey—highlight in this book the relationship that the two men had, Christian's thoughts about the school, and Aggrey's inner anguish just two months before his death. The narrative also gives us new information on the school.

As the excellent biographical work that this publication is, the book clearly accentuates Christian's African father-figure role particularly in the context of complex extended family relations. We read that within a few years after his arrival in the Gold Coast, Christian bought a property. He established a large family in the Gold Coast and put premium on the education of his children—three from Dominica and twelve others that he fathered with six mothers from the Gold Coast—many of whom studied in England. He kept constant touch with his children, wherever they happened to be, by letters and periodic visits. Indeed, Christian's move to the Gold Coast did not sever the relationship that he had with his birthplace, Dominica. He named the property that he acquired in the Gold Coast, "Dominica House". He communicated regularly with his relatives and friends in Dominica and provided monetary support to them throughout his life. While he left a substantial estate and adequate money for the education and upkeep of his children after his death, Christian did not forget his friends and relatives in Dominica and Gold Coast—they also received monetary bequests from him.

The Caribbean connections with Africa (trans-Atlantic connections) and their contribution to Africa's advancement in the early twentieth century are depicted in this book. Other areas covered are issues of migration processes, identity and community building of Caribbean migrants. The book also deals with matters of nationality and race (the expatriate and racism) and activities of professional West Indians who had also returned to live in the Gold Coast. Among these West Indian immigrants were George Stanley Lewis of St.

Lucia, brother of Nobel Laureate, Sir Arthur Lewis, and Bishop Joseph Oliver Bowers of Dominica, who migrated to the Gold Coast shortly before Christian's death in 1940. George James Christian established and played an important leadership role in maintaining a sense of community among the West Indians migrants in the Gold Coast of his day; he organized periodic gatherings for them. He took full advantage of his social networks and material resources which he used for the benefit of his West Indian colleagues and friends. The experiences of Christian and his West Indian colleagues in the Gold Coast represent an undocumented case of reverse migration of descendants of enslaved Africans from the Caribbean to West Africa.

Human life is not without its highs and lows and Christian had his share of both, as the account illustrates. While four of his children passed away in his lifetime, some of the others did not measure up to his expectations and standards. In most of his adult life, Christian was afflicted with poor health. He suffered from arthritis and gout, which sometimes affected adversely his ability to work. He died in 1940, at the age of 71, while still an active member of the Legislative Council of the Sekondi municipality.

As the book narrates, Christian had a full and fulfilled life. He accomplished his goal of returning to the homeland of his African ancestors and contributed immensely to the advancement of the Continent. He and his companions championed the Pan African project and untiringly carried it forward. The attitude and activities of Christian and his companions, as portrayed in *Returned Exile*, challenge us, both today's continental and diasporic (or what some would now call 'Global') Africans, to a commitment to prune and fertilize the ideals of Pan Africanism to enable this laudable project bear much fruit for our benefit and for the benefit of generations of African descendants to come.

A 320 paged book, clean, beautifully formatted and free of typographical and spelling errors, with a forward written by Kwesi Kwaa Prah, *Returned Exile* is a brilliant and an interesting biographical work. This book, which is a product of 25 years' effort, combines oral testimonies, primary documents and secondary sources to give the reader a fascinating and convincing account of the life of a diasporic (or 'Global') African migrant. While it pays attention to detail, the book is comprehensive and easy reading and will

interest academics and non-scholarly readers alike. It will be a valuable contribution to the currently scant literature on Caribbean-African biographies. This book will be a good read for students of biography, law, history, sociology and medicine, not to mention African and diasporic studies.

I highly recommend the book.

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