

ANDREA STUART

Trading Places

Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture

By Gaiutra Bahadur

(Hurst & Co 274pp £20)

The exigencies of sugar have shaped the modern world. This 'noble commodity', which was virtually unknown in the West before the Crusades, became by the 15th century as valuable as pearls and as sought after as musk. Over the next couple of centuries desire for the commodity dubbed the 'white gold' grew exponentially across all social classes; and so thousands of adventurers from the Old World 'took ship' for the New in order to cultivate sugar cane and become rich. Their migration precipitated another mass movement of people, this time a forced one in which millions of African slaves were transported to territories as varied as Brazil and Barbados, Cuba and Louisiana to labour in the cane fields. By the 18th century sugar was as significant to the geopolitics of the age as oil in the 20th century.

The history of sugar after emancipation is almost as tumultuous and bloody as the centuries that preceded it, as Gaiutra Bahadur explores in her remarkable book, *Coolie Woman*. She chronicles the extraordinary but neglected saga of indentured labour that evolved when the British began to replace slavery on their sugar plantations worldwide. But the book is more than this: it is also a highly personal account that traces the history of the author's maternal line to the present day. As Bahadur clammers down the generations, she provides the reader with a meticulous and lushly detailed family memoir. It is no wonder that she comments, 'Colonialism and migration are inextricably joined in my family history. Colonialism caused us to migrate, first to British Guiana, then from independent Guyana still struggling to emerge from its colonial past.'

The story begins when Bahadur's great-grandmother, a high-caste Hindu woman, leaves India on an indentured contract to cultivate sugar across the globe. Workers like her from the Indian subcontinent were known as 'coolies', a term that swiftly became a derogatory one, referring to those brown-skinned people who did the

most menial work and had the lowest status on the newly rejuvenated sugar plantations. Over the following eight decades the British would ferry more than a million of these maligned workers (a quarter of whom were women) across the globe to places as varied as British Guiana, Trinidad, Surinam, Mauritius and Fiji.

Bahadur is clear to note that 'indenture ships were not slave ships', but they were certainly bad enough to be going on with. On vessels with innocuous names such as *Hesperus* and *Whitby*, servants who had committed themselves to labour in the New World for up to seven years in the hope that they would return home enriched

Arrival, too, was a terrible letdown. Instead of 'the land of milk, honey and gold' that the recruiters in India had conjured up to ensnare their desperate victims, many of the places were unspeakable. Indeed Demerara, where Bahadur's ancestor was destined to disembark, was rightly known as a 'white man's grave' because of its high death rates. Whatever the newcomers' race, however, they perished extravagantly – as a result of long hours labouring under the unforgiving tropical sun, terrible housing, poor food, floggings and other punishments. It is no wonder that only a quarter of the Indians who left the subcontinent ever returned to their homeland, or that some historians have retrospectively described indenture as 'a new form of slavery'.

Someone once said that migration is a bit like murder: if you have done it once, it is easier to do it again. So it is no surprise that later generations of the author's family chose this option. In 1987 they fled the troubled realities of British Guiana,



The men and crew of an indenture vessel recently arrived in Georgetown, Demerara, c 1890

were allotted a space of just five square feet per person, only twice what most slave ships traversing the Middle Passage had allowed. Although conditions were not as diabolical as those endured by the slaves, the journey was three times longer and they still had to survive wormy rations and shipboard diseases. The situation was particularly bad for women, who often travelled alone and were vulnerable to frequent sexual exploitation, as well as still births, seasickness, homesickness and profound depression.

still haunted by its slave past, and moved to New Jersey. There the new migrants would find the conditions almost as hostile as those that their ancestors had once encountered elsewhere in the New World. A group of local citizens who had dubbed themselves the 'Dot Busters', a nom de guerre that was a riff on the film *Ghostbusters* and referred to the bindis that some married women wore on their foreheads, decided to terrorise this new wave of immigrants. Their manifesto, distributed around

the neighbourhood, was uncompromising: 'We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out.' As a result Bahadur's early days in America were full of hostility and paranoia. Her father had someone spit in his face as he waited innocently at a traffic light, while one member of their community was so badly beaten with baseball bats that he was left permanently disabled.

Bahadur begins and ends *Coolie Woman* by exploring the sense of alienation that her family's history of serial migration

has generated. She is a person with many countries, none of which feels entirely like home. When she returns to Guyana, where she was born, she no longer feels she belongs; the country is in confusion and she cannot imagine making a life there. And when she goes back to India, she finds her behaviour is too free, too immodest to be acceptable to those around her. It is no wonder that she describes migration as 'like stepping into a magician's box', where 'the sawing in half was just

a trick'. She notes that when her family moved, 'everything seemed to split apart. Time became twofold ... Space was also sundered, torn slowly and excruciatingly into two conflicting realms.' But in time she recovered, certainly enough to research this fascinating story, which will have resonance for millions of others who are swept up and transformed by history and have to find a new way to create 'home'.

To order this book for £20, see the *Literary Review Bookshop* on page 38

ODD ARNE WESTAD

Road to Pearl Harbor

China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival

By Rana Mitter

(Allen Lane/The Penguin Press 458pp £25)

States are forged by war and modern China is no exception. Between 1894 and 1953 the country had less than a decade of peace, and war laid waste to significant parts of the country. But out of these sixty years of strife came a state so cohesive and powerful that it has been able to shift its economy from capitalism to socialism and back again without losing power. The state also learned how to terrorise its own population and get away with it. This is what wars teach states, except in cases when a well-educated and politicised citizenry demands that other lessons be learned.

No war did more to shape today's China than the Second World War, and Rana Mitter's new book is an outstanding account of how the country fought that war and survived it. The war against Japan created modern China, Mitter argues, even though the group that came to be the war's main beneficiary – the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – differed in its political ideology from Chiang Kai-shek's wartime government. Chiang's party bore the main brunt of the war effort and suffered as a consequence, not only in losses but also in

the damage caused to inner cohesion and financial viability. But the lessons from the war were applied assiduously by Chiang's Chinese enemies, the CCP, when they wrested power from the government in 1949 and set up their own state.

The war against Japan that broke out in 1937 was one that China was woefully

destroy China as an independent country. This time, China's leaders were facing one of the world's major powers in a full onslaught. And they were facing it alone.

A lot of nonsense has been written about the differences between Chinese and Japanese paths of development since the mid-19th century, which – we are assured – gave Japan all the advantages and China none. Japan got it right, at least as far as power is concerned, it is assumed.

The reality is much more complex, and Japan's advantages in 1937 were more contingent than received wisdom allows. Chiang had been preparing for war, but his government had done so with one hand tied behind its back, since it always had to contend with other power holders in China (including the communists). As a state, his version of 'new China' had been born during a global depression, with the economic weakness which that entailed. And Chiang knew, as did everyone else in the 1930s, that building a powerful army takes time. Japan had been at it since the 1870s; Chiang's national revolution went back only to 1927.

As Mitter shows, it is also a myth that the outbreak of total war between the two countries in 1937 was the inevitable result of long-term enmities. Relations between China and Japan had been characterised by ups and downs since the late 19th century and in spite of an earlier war there had been at least as much cooperation as conflict.



Mao Zedong speaking in Yan'an, May 1938

unprepared to fight. Most of the wars since the last Sino-Japanese War in 1894–5 had been domestic, or those fought with the limited contribution of a foreign power. From the very beginning this was a different kind of war. Japan intended conquest and her express purpose was to