Gemma Romain, *Race, Sexuality and Identity in Britain and Jamaica: The Biography of Patrick Nelson, 1916–1963*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. ix + 264 pp. (Cloth US\$106.40)

Few specialists on the Caribbean or on the presence of black people in Britain have heard of Patrick Nelson, a Jamaican of working-class origin who emigrated to Britain in 1937. This biography by Gemma Romain draws an intimate picture of his life and times based on archival sources, as well as “letters, and subaltern voices,” principally the correspondence between Nelson and Duncan Grant, the Bloomsbury group painter who was his lover and friend. The result is a splendid piece of research taking Nelson from birth to grave.

Nelson worked in the hotel industry in Jamaica, came to Britain in the late 1930s, was employed as a valet in a wealthy household, and became a model for painters in London where he met Grant. Not long after the outbreak of war he joined the army, becoming a private in the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps. Wounded and captured at Dunkirk, he spent the next four years in Silesia as a German prisoner of war. As with many other prisoners he used some of his time wisely in self-education, but despite aspiration seems not to have acquired sufficient skills to take him into any professional occupation; even his letters indicate that he had a rather minimal command of spelling and grammar. He was repatriated to Britain on health grounds in September 1944. After the war he returned to Jamaica, then came back to Britain briefly in late 1947, returned to Jamaica where he lived a listless and lonely life, and came back to the United Kingdom in 1960 or 1961. There, he resumed his friendship with Grant, who painted his portrait as a slouched figure in a chair but seemingly at ease with his life and his lot. He died in London.

The central theme of this biography is that Nelson was a practicing homosexual, leading a precarious lifestyle in the legally and morally condemnatory climate of Britain before the late 1970s (much like that of Jamaica today). In Britain in the 1930s–40s it was not difficult to have a covert sexual life, depending on who you were, with whom you mixed, and how you behaved. Being an artist might provide shelter, social class possibly offered latitude, and the war years the shield of social disorder. Romain presents Nelson’s life against the background of the sexually libertarian art “set,” making clear that despite friendships his was not a happy life and that he regularly wrote of his loneliness. She also introduces other black homosexuals in London, most of whom appear to have escaped the censure of the law by exercising caution. One man she might well have included, but didn’t, was Dr. Cecil Belfield Clarke, a Bajan who graduated from Cambridge, became a medical practitioner in London, and

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© DAVID KILLINGRAY, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09301043

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

was an active supporter of both the League of Coloured Peoples and the West African Students Union.

One aspect of Nelson's homosexuality that Romain does not adequately examine is his lifestyle in the light of his avowed Christian Catholic faith. Nelson wrote of the Roman Catholic Church as providing "a solace," described his regular attendance at mass, and made clear that he was devoting time to the "study of God and the Christian religion," but nowhere does he mention the contradiction between Catholic doctrine and his sexual behavior. Nor does his biographer. For the sake of context Romain is eager to digress at some length about the Institute of Jamaica, the growth of tourism in Jamaica, and the origins and inhabitants of Rowton Houses used by down-and-outs in London, but she fails to look at what seems, to this reader, to be a vital question. Instead, her comments on official church doctrine and homosexuality focus on general condemnations voiced by Anglican clerics in Jamaica.

Romain is to be applauded for rescuing Nelson from obscurity and for her skill in telling his life story and thus fulfilling a dream that he entertained at various times. Her account of his life in London as a black migrant and a member of a small sexual minority provides a view of the world far removed from the lives and experiences of many of the other black people in the imperial metropolis, and across Britain, who rather than frequenting night clubs or seeking the company of artists, would go home to their families after a day of work. In focusing on a homosexual black man this book adds a further and more detailed dimension to the history of the black experience in the metropole as described in such books as Marc Matera's *Black London* (2015).

David Killingray

School of Advanced Study, University of London

dmkillingray@hotmail.com