This book is the product of a decade of work inspired by my desire to better understand how Britain’s imperial past and the agency of migrants have contributed to shaping modern Britain. My interest in these topics stems from a number of personal experiences and is a reflection of my multiple identities. I spent most of my life up to my mid-twenties crossing cultural boundaries. I was born in the north-east of England, then started school in France before moving to Gabon where I went to high school at the Lycée National Léon Mba. I then returned to France to complete my secondary education and go to university and journalism school, before moving to Romania to do my national service as a French citizen (working for the French Foreign Office). I finally returned to the UK (I am also a British citizen) in my mid-twenties where I went to work on the BBC World Service’s broadcasts to French-speaking Africa. I developed through this trajectory an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the world and, through the African teachers at my state school in Libreville, a sense of how the new social realities of independent African countries could nurture a quest for different interpretations of the past, replacing colonial histories with closer engagement with the continent’s history. In others words, an understanding that the past is also political.

My family background is also mixed. I have ancestors with roots in Ireland, Germany and the Indian subcontinent. Such trajectories and mixed backgrounds are becoming more common in modern Britain. Yet, histories, including academic histories, continue to remain overly focused on events that occurred within the confines of national borders, rather than exploring the international relationships and movements that have contributed over time to the making of the modern
world. This is slowly changing in the world of scholarship but the history of migration remains a marginal pursuit as does writing history that seeks to speak to contemporary debates. This feeling was exacerbated when, having decided to move on from journalism and working as a press officer for the Scottish Refugee Council in the early 2000s, I witnessed the full force of the wave of hostility towards migrants that was then building up and continues to play such an important part in British public life. I was intrigued to find that in a city such as Glasgow, built on imperial trade and the labour of migrants from Ireland and elsewhere, international migration could be perceived by many (not all) as such an alien and unwelcome phenomenon. I felt strongly that a lack of historical awareness was at least partially at the root of such attitudes. I therefore seek to reconnect in these pages with a tradition of writing history that sees it as having as much to tell us about the present as about the past. I was keen though to carry out rigorous research on this topic and not to succumb to the temptation of uncritically celebrating the roles of migrants. I wanted my work to be part of a process of critical engagement with the past that I feel would make a significant contribution to public discourse today.

Having spent a substantial part of my childhood in Howdon, in industrial North Tyneside in the north-east of England (during summer holidays from Africa), I also witnessed at first hand the central part that South Asian doctors played in staffing general practice in working-class areas. To say I was surprised that no historian had sought to tell this story would be an understatement. It offered an ideal opportunity to write a history of migration that was also a history of how Britain came to be what it is today. This was particularly the case in the light of the status of the NHS in the British national psyche—akin to a ‘national religion’ as the former British Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson quipped—and the central position of general practice within the NHS. This is the path that led me to research the movement of these doctors and its impact on the making of modern British healthcare.

Along the way, I have naturally incurred a number of intellectual debts—too many to list. Whilst apologising to those left unnamed, I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Aneez Esmail at the University of Manchester without whom this book would not have seen the light of day. His work challenging racism in the British medical profession and his pioneering exploration of the role of migrant
South Asian doctors in the NHS laid a substantial amount of groundwork for the research I present here. He eloquently formulated a number of highly relevant questions about the role of South Asian medical migrants in British medicine that I have here attempted to answer. I was also fortunate to meet Stephanie Snow at an early stage of my time as a researcher at Manchester, which has been my academic base for the last ten years. Her expertise when it comes to the history of the NHS and of British general practice was instrumental in enabling me to produce what is both a discussion of the role of a group of migrants in Britain and a revisiting of the history of British healthcare. Similarly, Virinder Kalra’s background in sociology led me to give greater consideration to social theory when seeking to understand the personal and professional trajectories of my research participants and I am grateful to him for encouraging me to go down this road. Thanks are also due to the University of Manchester and the Medical Research Council for providing me with three years of funding to research the history of South Asian GPs in the NHS.

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This book would not have been written without the cooperation and goodwill of those who gave up their time and often invited me into their homes to talk about their lives and their work in the NHS. In many cases research participants provided me with documents and photographs which cast further light on their experiences; some of them are reproduced on these pages with their permission. A number of participants also went out of their way to put me in touch with potential interviewees. I am deeply grateful to Dr Dipak Ray, Dr Rooin Boomla, Dr Darius
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Some of the arguments I develop here were presented in earlier forms in journal articles and in a chapter included in an edited volume on the migration of physicians. I would like to thank the University of Toronto Press and the publishers of Oral History, Diversity and Equality.
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Finally, a note on the style of this book, which in accordance with the task I set myself, seeks to build bridges between academic research and the concerns of a broader readership. My aim was to produce a text that would be both a scholarly work of serious research that contributes to future thinking about the history of the NHS and one that remains accessible to a wider readership interested in exploring a different understanding of the role of migration in the making of Britain. In presenting my conclusions, I have tried to achieve a balance between writing in a scholarly fashion, referencing claims and engaging with existing literature and debates whilst at the same time producing an account of this history that might speak to a broader audience not just of non-historians but of readers interested in engaging with the significance of this history. It is in this spirit that I have also allowed space for the voices of the participants in this project to be heard, both to provide evidence of the claims I am advancing and to enable readers to immerse themselves in these accounts.

I believe this to be a logical approach consistent with my aim to write history that is of relevance in the public domain and that it is possible, indeed necessary, to seek out new ways of connecting academic research to a broader readership. A particular source of inspiration in this respect was the anthropologist Paul Stoller’s account of his dialogue with one of his principal informants when he was writing his classic study of traditional beliefs in West Africa, In Sorcery’s Shadow. Adamu Jenitongo enjoined him to ‘Produce something that will be remembered, something that describes me and you, something that my grandchildren and your grandchildren will use to remember the past, something they will use to learn about the world.’ Scholarly work can surely only be improved by following this advice.
Notes

1 For a detailed discussion of these issues see A. Bammer & R.-E. Boetcher Joeres, (eds), *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).