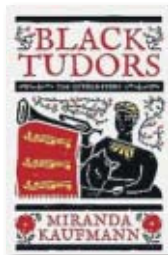


Forgotten by history: the Afro-Tudors in merrie England

**Black Britons have a long heritage,
as this fascinating account of early
settlers reveals, says **Leanda de Lisle****



Black Tudors
The Untold Story
by *Miranda
Kaufmann*

Oneworld
376pp; £18.99

I will hold back, for now, on the trumpeter who worked in international espionage, and the ecstatic user of a Tudor dildo, who “with Oh, and Oh... itching moves her hips/And to and fro full lightly starts and skips”. Any fears that *Black Tudors* will prove worthy but dull (the book threatens to make us question the inevitability of the slave trade) are unfounded.

There was, of course, nothing inevitable about the Anglo-Caribbean slave trade, because evil is a choice. It was one we had not yet made in Tudor England. British involvement in the slave trade was largely north to south, with the British as the slaves. The coastal villages of Tudor England and Ireland were raided for the slave markets of north Africa. This was still going on in the reign of Charles I, when the

British slave trade to the Caribbean began.

While there were thousands of white slaves in Africa, those few black Africans who ended up in England were free, and it is their rich and emblematic stories as Afro-Tudors — and Stuarts — that Kaufmann tells. Each of them, from a retired pirate to an African prince, is introduced with a little piece of fiction; a few paragraphs, written in italics, in which they are imagined expressing their thoughts at a particular point in their lives. Yet this fiction is kept quite separate from the history.

The subjects of biographies can take over an author's imagination. Weaker historians give way to this and express what they feel were their subjects' thoughts at particular moments. Kaufmann doesn't do this. The biographical material she has is thin — sometimes very thin. A Jacobean Gloucestershire villager left no record

beyond the probate list of what she had owned at the time of her death. Yet Kaufmann brings her subjects to life by using only the proper tools of the historian: empathy tethered to fact and context. The fictional passages are simply a charming and novel introduction to their real world.

The names of Kaufmann's black Tudors reflect the history of European empire-

building, the importance of baptism in England, blunt description of their colouring, the popularity of nicknames and the English fondness for puns: they include the Latin sounding Cattelena of Almondsbury, an Edward Swarthy, the silk weaver Reasonable Blackman, and John Blanke (as in the French *blanc*). This last was a trumpeter at the court of the first Tudor king, Henry VII. He performed at the king's funeral, then, in a scarlet livery, at the coronation of Henry VIII.

Several other black Tudors appear at key historical moments — diving for salvage after the sinking of Henry VIII's great battleship the *Mary Rose*, or accompanying Francis Drake as he set out on his circumnavigation of the world.

Kaufmann suggests that Blanke may have come to England in the train of Katherine of Aragon, or with Juana of Castile

and Philip the Handsome, who were shipwrecked on the Dorset coast. This idea opens her introduction to the Spanish slave trade, which began with their conquest of the New World, and to the courts of the first Tudor kings. Kaufmann thus frames the wider history, before adding details that allow her subjects to take shape.

Blanke is the only black Tudor to have a portrait — so we can see he wasn't *blanc* at all. It appears in the Westminster Tournament roll with Blanke mounted on a horse and playing what we would now call a cavalry trumpet. However, it is his demand to Henry VIII for pay that makes him more immediate and real: "His wage now and as yet is not sufficient to maintain and keep him to do your Grace like service as other your trumpets do." Henry VIII was a talented and knowledgeable musician, and it seems he appreciated the services of Blanke, whose money was doubled.

Kaufmann then considers what Blanke needed his money for: the costs of travelling with the court, and the English love of fine clothes. Henry later paid for Blanke's wedding outfit, a gown of violet cloth (violet was a favourite colour for weddings) plus a hat and a bonnet.

Trumpeters such as Blanke were not only present at big state occasions.

They also acted as messengers and were supposed to enjoy diplomatic immunity that allowed them free passage through enemy territory. This made them useful as spies — something I had not considered.

In 1560 the Duke of Norfolk complained to William Cecil of the arrival of a trumpeter from Scotland carrying letters, "but more to spy than otherwise".

Kaufmann is struck too by the ordinariness of the lives of her black Tudors and Stuarts. It did not seem remarkable, as it would have done two centuries later, to see the black porter Swarthy beat the educated white manager of an iron works on their employer's orders. Porters were essentially security guards, and he was doing his job as any other English porter might.

The dildo story comes as background to the life of one of only two women featured: the "tawny" prostitute Anne Cobbie. Black prostitutes were rare, and Cobbie's striking "soft skin" earned her a high price. Kaufmann describes the rich clothes worn by such high-class tarts, and it is a client's description of a visit to one such that includes the passage on the dildo ("stiff as steel" and used "with many a sigh").

This account, Kaufmann points out, was written for what Pepys called "one hand reading", and a prostitute's expected fate was to be left, by 35, "fitter to furnish a hospital than to garnish a bedchamber".

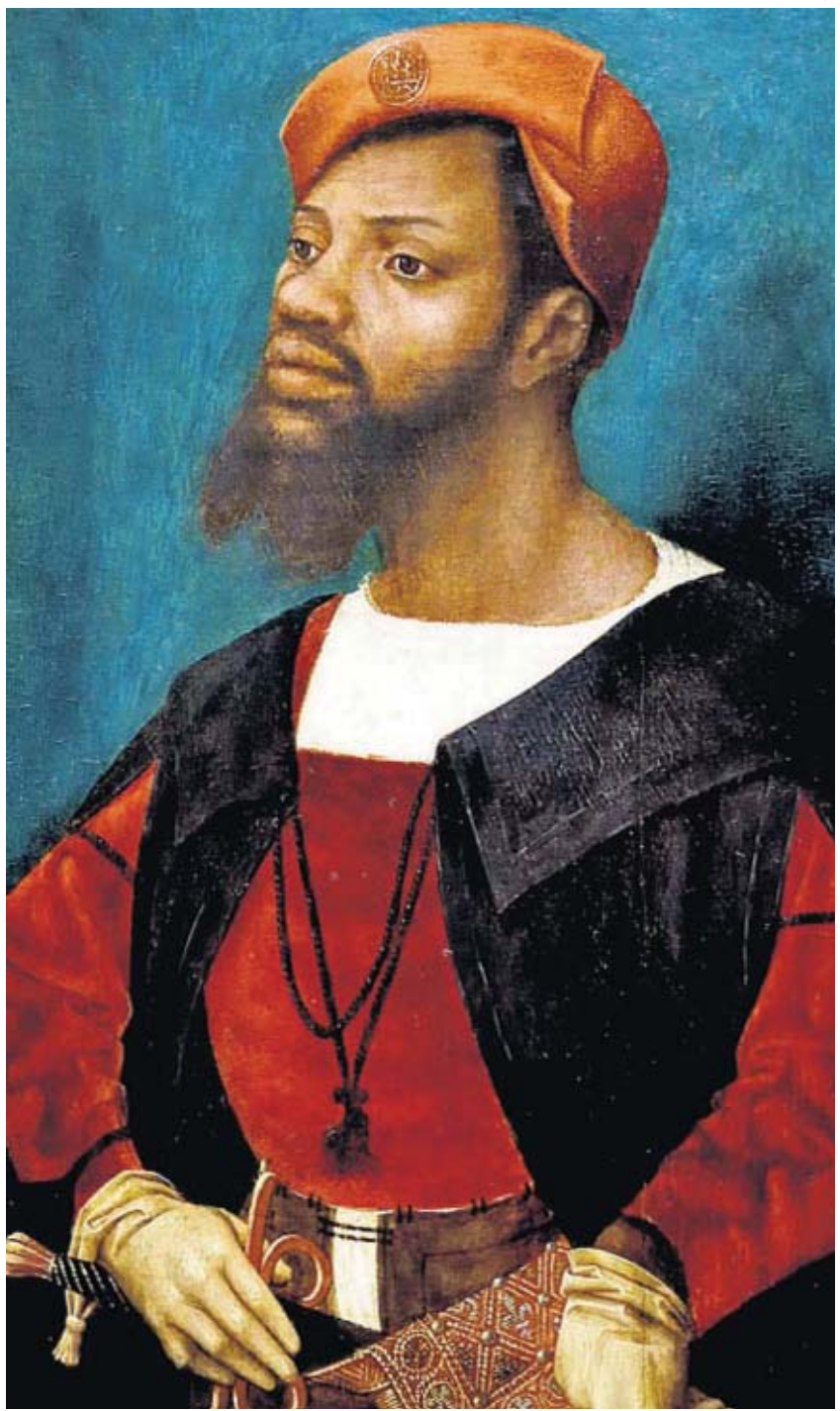
I was glad of a happier ending to *Black Tudors*: Kaufmann's last little biography describes a black Gloucestershire villager and her cow. Kaufmann set the scene so well I had happy daydreams of independent single women such as her Cattelena and their animals, given such names as Brown Snout, Lovely and Welcome Home.

And there is something moving in finding black Englishmen and women simply pottering around Tudor and Stuart England. A shared past can unite us, and it is a worthy achievement to unearth such a past and do it so well. *Black Tudors* is light as a feather, yet well informed and informative: an absolute joy.

Leanda de Lisle is the author of *Tudor: The Family Story*

Coastal villages of Tudor England were raided for north African slave markets

ALAMY



AFRO-EUROPEAN A member of the Habsburg court painted by Jan Mostaert, c 1525-30