

Clime, complexion and degree

Black Africans in Britain in the early modern period

In August 1600, Abd-al-Wahid bin Masoud bin Muhammad al-Annuri arrived in England as an ambassador from Morocco and stayed in the Strand in London for six months, having his portrait painted as he waited to meet Queen Elizabeth I. His was not the first Moroccan embassy to visit England – there had been one eleven years earlier – and, in 1600, Al-Annuri and his advisers were also not the only Moroccans in town. Just down the road in East Smithfield lived one Mary Fillis. She had been born in Morocco in 1577, as the daughter of a basket-weaver and shovel-maker, and had arrived in England at the age of six or seven, when she became a servant of the Barker family, in the London parish of St Olave's, Hart Street. She was not the only African in the household – twenty-year-old Leying Mouea and a man called George were there also. In 1597, Fillis moved to join the Smithfield household of a seamstress, Millicent Porter. With Porter's encouragement, "now taking some hold of faith in Jesus Christ, [Fillis] was desirous to become a Christian", so on June 3, 1597, she was baptized at St Botolph's Aldgate, with Porter, William Benton and Margery Barrick standing as her godparents. She is one of more than sixty Africans whose baptisms were recorded in this period, and one of the 360 Africans living in England and Scotland over the Tudor and early Stuart period that Miranda Kaufmann has discovered.

This is important because such evidence of a multiracial English/British history appears to be relatively unknown. In August 2017, a BBC cartoon called *The Story of Britain* depicted an ordinary Roman British family, in which the father was black. This caused some outrage because many people thought it was both anachronistic and tokenistic. But, as Mary Beard pointed out, remains from third-century AD officers, soldiers and slaves of African

origin have been found in York, and research suggests that people of North African descent were among the highest social echelons of Roman British society. Unsurprisingly, this did not convince some, who insisted Professor Beard was being politically correct when, instead, she was being historically correct.

Dr Kaufmann's meticulous new book sets the record straight for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. We learn that a black African called John Blanke played the trumpet at the coronation of Henry VIII, and that Jacques Francis was one of three African salvage divers attempting to recover guns from the sunken *Mary Rose* (and the first known African to testify before an English court, in February 1548). We discover that there were Africans on board Sir Francis Drake's *Golden Hind* as it circumnavigated the world (including a black woman called Maria, who seems to have been raped and then abandoned when heavily pregnant), and, in 1596, a black man called Edward Swarthy whipped a white man, John Guye (like him a servant) on the orders of their master Sir Edward Wynter. In short, we need to reconceptualize our whole idea of the Tudor period to recognize that black Africans were present at some of the pivotal moments of the century.

Kaufmann has chosen to tell the stories of ten Africans in this period. Her extensive research draws on a wide range of archival sources, including parish registers, municipal records, tax returns, household accounts, inventories, wills, letters, diaries and travel accounts. Such sources throw up fragmentary information: sometimes what we actually know about these individuals is very little indeed. We know, for example, that Anne Cobbie, a prostitute at St Clement Danes's bawdy house in Westminster, was described by a fellow prostitute in 1626 as a "tawny Moor", and had been overheard to say

that men would “rather give her a piece [a gold coin worth 22 shillings] to lie with her than another five shillings because of her soft skin”. She is the only African prostitute active in London in this period of whose existence we are certain, and her story is important, but we know nothing more of her. Of Cattelena of Almondsbury – a black singlewoman who owned a cow, and who lived in Gloucestershire – we have only a list of her goods at her death in 1625, but knowing she was there “forces us to reimagine rural life in this period”.

Because Kaufmann is working from such little data, she uses her chapters to weave in incidental detail about contemporary life. Along the way we learn about the employment of Africans at royal courts in Europe; surgery, plague and syphilis; the history of Moroccan politics; what sailors wore; how women got into prostitution; that 60 per cent of Blackbeard’s 1718 crew were black, and that being “naughty” had strong sexual connotations in Tudor England because “naught” or “nothing” was slang for female genitals, which lacked a “thing”. At its best, the result is a form of “thick description”, setting the little we know about these individuals in context so that it becomes meaningful to the reader, and doing the best with what’s available – for which Kaufmann has diligently scoured the archives. But it doesn’t always come off, and one sometimes longs for less digression.

Kaufmann’s purpose in writing this book was to make it better known that there were Africans in England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – and that they were not expelled by Elizabeth I, as some histories have erroneously claimed. They were also not enslaved: none of the characters she considers was a slave, and she proves that Africans in England could be financially independent – like Reasonable Blackman, a skilled silk weaver in Elizabethan London – or even wealthy enough, as the gardener Henry Jetto was, to leave legacies to his family when he died in 1627.

She also, more implicitly, demonstrates that *Othello* notwithstanding, there seems to

be little evidence of racism in this period. When Jacques Francis testified in 1548, three witnesses tried to discredit his testimony. None of them mentioned his race. They did call him an “infidel” and a “slave” – neither true – and while it may be that these were euphemistic racial slurs, slavery was not yet coterminous with blackness, so this seems unlikely. The simple fact is that the colour of his skin was not remarked on, suggesting, as historians of early Virginia have also argued, that racism was a product of slavery and not vice versa. When Swarthy whipped Guye in 1596, no one tried to stop him or commented on the anomaly of a black man whipping a white man – because it was not yet an anomaly. Kaufmann also demonstrates that there was no evidence of hostility to the interracial marriages recorded in the parish registers (although it may be that we lack the sources that would provide us with such information).

This is all important stuff, so it is frustrating that the title of the book – *Black Tudors* (the phrase is doubly capitalized throughout the book) – is rather a misrepresentation of the contents. Chronologically, “Tudor” is used in the loosest of senses. Only the first two of ten characters lived in the first seventy-five years of the Tudor period, and four were Elizabethan. Chapters seven to ten feature four stories from after 1610 and are therefore, technically, about “black Stuarts”, while the wide-ranging context in previous chapters stretches well into the eighteenth century. It is clear why Kaufmann stretches so far – her PhD research, on which the book was based, considered Africans in Britain 1500–1640. The book is also geographically capacious. All of our ten spent some time in England, but the book encompasses Scotland as well (Scots were not “Tudors”), and gives mini-histories of Africans in Antwerp, Virginia, Bermuda and elsewhere.

Nor are such stories entirely untold, as the subtitle promises – as well as David Olusoga’s *Black and British* of 2016 (which tells some of these stories in brief, drawing on Kaufmann’s earlier work), there are several recent works exploring the lives of black people in England

and Europe in the early modern period, including Imtiaz Habib's *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677* (2008); Onyeka's *Blackamoors: Africans in Tudor England* (2013), and T. F. Earle and Kate J. P. Lowe's edited volume *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (2005).

For all that, maybe the genius of the book lies in its imprecise, eye-catching title; the Tudor name has potential to attract a wider audience to an important part of our history. There, this audience will find itself in the hands of a historian of excellent investigative skills, who shows attention to detail, uses evidence with appropriate caution, and has the sensibility of a scholar. While modern questions of identity prompt her research, Kaufmann does not allow them to give the answers: today's issues "may be the source of our questions, but they cannot be allowed to shape our conclusions about the past".

SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB

Miranda Kaufmann

BLACK TUDORS

The untold story

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The Drake Jewel, given by Elizabeth I in 1588, and thought to commemorate Francis Drake's alliance with the Cimarrons of Panama