

The imperial roots of British racism

“Sydney Smith tells us that men seldom eulogize the wisdom and virtues of their fathers, but to excuse some folly or wickedness of their own.”

Speech by Frederick Douglass 1852

David Olusoga's marvellous book, *Black and British, A Forgotten History*, has been reissued with a new chapter which brings it up to date with the Windrush scandal. His book looks at how Britain's imperial past has been whitewashed, sanitised. Self-knowledge for an individual requires an understanding of the past that shaped you. It is the same for countries. The narrative created by the British ruling class and all its hangers on has painted a picture for British history of their beneficence. Amongst the myths of the British state is the story of how it ended slavery as a kind of moral act which showed the world the way. What is rarely mentioned is the fact that Britain did not compensate the slaves, **but the slave owners** to the tune of £20 million, or 40% of the state's spending at the time. Olusoga suggests that this would be worth £17 billion today. Moreover, Britain instituted a six year period under which the slaves would work as “apprentices” to the slave owners. The idea is that the slaves' freedom was *given to them*. In fact there were a series of revolts without which, if slavery was ended, it would have taken much longer. Britain was forced to end the “apprenticeship” phase early by a rebellion of the former slaves.

In a 2019 poll on attitudes to the British Empire by Yougov 32% of those surveyed thought that the British Empire was something to be proud of, only 19% thought it was something to be ashamed of, 37% thought it was neither and 12% didn't know. For Tory voters the corresponding figures were 53%, 6%, 36% and 5%. For Labour voters they were 21%, 31%, 38% and 11%. 50% of Leave voters thought it was something to be proud of as opposed to just 20% of remain voters.

Such percentages could only be a reflection of lack of knowledge of what the Empire was, what it did, and the rationale for it. Olusoga explains the change in attitudes in the 19th century from the time of the campaign to end Britain's involvement in slavery to the phase of imperialism which culminated in the 'Scramble for Africa'. Imperial powers rushed to take hold of as much land and resources as they could, for fear of losing out to others. The development of 'scientific' racial theories which viewed black people as lesser mortals and closer to animals, played a key role in changing attitudes.

The British labour movement and the Labour Party in particular have failed to face up to the rapacious and bloody history of the British Empire and the white supremacism on which it was based. This history has been covered up and not just by the Tory Party.

During the Second World War Labour was part of the coalition which had to deal with the thorny issue of segregation in the US army garrisoned in Britain. Would segregation be allowed by Britain beyond US bases? Broadly speaking black troops were more liked by much of the British population than the often flashy and arrogant white US troops. Much of the British public was disgusted by the mistreatment and prejudice visited on the black troops by the white ones. George Orwell commented that “The general consensus of opinion seems to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes.” There was a great deal of violence by white GIs against black ones which was a source of real tension between the former and local people.

In Parliament MP Tom Driberg asked Churchill whether he would raise with the Americans the attacks on black GIs, and ask the US military authorities to instruct their men that there was no colour bar in Britain. Churchill answered evasively. The Communist MP Willie Gallagher then asked Churchill whether he was aware of the letter he had sent to him recording that a number of servicemen had contacted him to tell him that an officer had given them a lecture advising them of the necessity for discrimination in connection with Negroes in London. Churchill wouldn't answer him.

Olusoga says that the lecture was probably one given by a Senior Administrative Officer in the army's Southern Command; *Notes on relations with coloured troops*. This told the British servicemen that they would have “to adjust their attitude so that it conforms to that of the white

American citizen.” The author of this document Major General Arthur Dowler wrote that “while there are many coloured men of high mentality and cultural distinction the generality are of a simple mental outlook.” They were obviously “in the generality” an inferior 'race'. He was especially worried about the possibility of women fraternising with black soldiers. The document was written without the say so of the War Office. However, official attitudes were similar.

On the 13th of October 1942 the War Cabinet met to discuss the issue. It decided that the government would not oppose the American Army's policy of segregation but would not permit British authorities, military or civilian, to participate in enforcing it. However, it concluded that “it was desirable that the people of this country should avoid becoming too friendly with coloured American troops”. One American general said that British black citizens were incensed by the behaviour of white GIs, who cursed them, told them to get off the pavement, leave eating places and separated them from their white wives.

As a result of the Cabinet meeting a guidance memo was issued: *Instructions as to the advice that should be given to British service personnel*. It was agreed by the Cabinet and by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, Eisenhower. Although less frank than Dowler's document its message was “not dissimilar”, suggesting that Britons “should be sympathetic towards coloured American troops – but remember that they are not accustomed in their own country to close and intimate relations with white people.” It also explained that “for a white woman to go about in the company of a Negro American is likely to lead to controversy and ill-feeling.” Of course, in America a black man could be killed for speaking to a white woman 'out of turn'. “Care should be taken not to invite white and coloured Americans into the home at the same time”. Southern white US GIs were outraged at the very prospect of sexual relations between black men and white women. Through 1942 and '43 there was “a sustained campaign of violence” against black GIs who met or dated white British women.

In Derbyshire in 1943 wartime regulations were used by police to stop the association of British women with black GIs, whilst in Melton Mowbrey five women were prosecuted for 'trespassing' on premises occupied by black troops. In Newton Abbott in 1944 another group of women were charged with 'violating the security' of a nearby military area.

In November 1942 in relation to the occurrence of 'brown babies', Herbert Morrison said that education was unlikely “to have any influence on the class of women who are attracted by coloured men.”

In 1947 a British woman from the Midlands travelled to Virginia to marry a black GI. It was, of course, illegal there. The groom was arrested and sent to the state industrial farm whilst the woman was deported. Tom Driberg again raised the issue in Parliament. Ernest Bevin responded that he could see no grounds for action as the case was “in accordance with Virginia State law”.

The 'colour problem'

The Army Bureau of Current Affairs produced an educational pamphlet for British troops, *The Colour Problem as the American sees it*. It suggested that 'the problem' of 'half-caste' children was not just an American concern but a British one too. It stated that whilst it was not necessary to go into “a long discussion as to whether mixed marriages between white and coloured are good or bad”, “what is fairly obvious that in our present society such unions are not desirable, since the children resulting from them are neither one thing nor the other and are thus badly handicapped in the struggle for life.”

In 1945, soon after the end of the war British Pan-Africanist leader George Padmore wrote to Clement Atlee. His *Open letter to the Prime Minister* called for racial discrimination in Britain to be outlawed and made a punishable offence. The letter declared that “to condemn the Imperialism of Germany, Japan and Italy, while condoning that of Britain would be more than dishonest. It would be a betrayal of the sacrifice and sufferings and the toil and sweat of the common people of Britain. All Imperialism is evil.” Believing this, the Federation therefore demanded “for the Colonial peoples the immediate right to self-determination” as an effective step in the process of banishing wars.

Atlee never replied to Padmore nor did his government address the problem of discrimination or end the colour bar which had kept black workers out of some workplaces. To resolve the acute

labour shortage after the war the government sought to use white foreign workers as opposed to black workers from the empire. In 1946 the Cabinet Manpower Working Party estimated that Britain needed 940,000 additional workers. This was later increased to 1,346,000. To help fill the gap 100,000 members of the Polish armed forces and their families, who had lived in Britain during the war and fought against the Nazis, were given the right to settle permanently. A further 80,000 European 'displaced persons' housed in miserable camps in Germany and Austria were recruited under the European Voluntary Worker scheme. In the post-war decades there was an influx of Irish workers. "However," says Olusoga, "the government actively discouraged immigration by black West Indians."

In early 1947 the Colonial Office dispatched an official to the West Indies "to dispel rumours that there were thousands of job vacancies in Britain". Alas, newsagents on the islands stocked copies of local papers like the *South London Daily Express* in which West Indians were able to read job adverts.

"Incredulous local governors and journalists were informed that these were not real openings but 'paper vacancies'."

An official from the Ministry of Labour warned that

"It may become extremely embarrassing if at a time of labour shortage there should be nothing but discouragement for British subjects from the West Indies while we go to great trouble to get foreign workers."

Yet the Ministry "remained stridently opposed to recruitment in the West Indies".

In 1947 the Ministry embarked on an evaluation exercise ostensibly to determine the potential of "surplus male West Indians". It concluded that they would be unsuitable for outside work in the cold because of "their susceptibility to colds and more serious chest and lung ailments." (Difficult to imagine how those West Indian pilots in the RAF managed in those bloody cold planes). However, simultaneously they would apparently find working in coal mines 'too hot'!

None of the racist subterfuge stopped West Indians coming. When the Empire Windrush landed in Tilbury Docks there was much media coverage. The Evening Standard carried the headline 'Welcome Home' (to the 'mother country').

"The government, however, regarded her as an embarrassment. There were instant recriminations in Whitehall and behind the scenes attempts were made to ensure that the *Windrush* did not set a precedent and inspire further migration. Arthur Creech Jones (Labour's Colonial Secretary) was heavily criticised for having allowed her to sail. He was accused of having "failed to put a lid on things" and permitting this "invasion" (less than 500 people) by West Indians. The Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, was quick to stress that the West Indians had not been invited to Britain, and warned colleagues that "the arrival of these substantial numbers of men under no organised arrangement is bound to result in considerable difficulty and disappointment...I hope no encouragement will be given to others to follow their example."

According to Olusoga there had been attempts to stop the Windrush leaving Jamaica; Atlee had made enquiries as to whether she could be diverted to East Africa and the West Indians offered jobs on ground nut farms. When Windrush did dock the government policy was to disperse them across the country. Industry snapped them up. Within a month all but 12 had jobs.

On the day that the ship arrived 12 Labour MPs sent a letter to Atlee requesting that he put in place controls to limit black immigration into Britain. The letter said that "an influx of coloured people domiciled here "is likely to impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our people" causing "discord and unhappiness among all concerned".

Five weeks after the West Indians landed at Tilbury the British Nationality Act received royal ascent. It gave the people of the empire who had previously held the status of British Subjects the new status of Commonwealth Citizen. This gave them the right to enter and settle in Britain. Yet MPs of all parties imagined the act would simply enable the two way flow between Britain and

'the old dominions' (Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand). The people the government envisaged making use of the right of entry and residence enshrined in the act were white people of 'British stock' who were 'coming home' to Britain. Yet, says Olusoga

“Quite unintentionally, that had been busily discouraging immigration by non-white people from the West Indies had signed the warrant for exactly the sort of mass migration they so vehemently opposed.”

The act guaranteed commonwealth citizens the right of entry and residence in Britain, and would so until the Tory government ended that right in 1962.

The racism exhibited by the Atlee government was also represented in the trades unions. At its 1948 conference the National Union of Seamen discussed the 'colour question'. The Assistant General Secretary boasted that

“In quite a few instances we have been successful in changing ships from coloured to white, and in many instances persuading masters and engineers that white men should be carried in preference to coloured.”

On other occasions committees had been set up to vet coloured entrants to the country who 'claimed' to be seamen. In that year there was a spate of violence against hostels in which black sailors lived. When a mob of around 2,000 attacked one hostel in Liverpool the police...arrested the black sailors! David Olusoga suggests that distrust of the police was prevalent into the 1980s.

The Tory government which replaced Labour in 1951 instructed government officials to look at ways to devise mechanisms by which West Indians might be kept out of the country contrary to the rights they enjoyed under the 1948 Nationality Act. One member of Churchill's cabinet, the Marquess of Salisbury warned that the arrival of a large number of black people posed a threat to the “racial character of the English people.” Churchill expressed his concern that if West Indian migration to Britain continued “we would have a magpie people and that would never do”. In 1955 Harold McMillan reported in his diary, with incredulity, that Churchill thought that “Keep Britain White” *might make a good slogan for the forthcoming election*. In 1955 Churchill's government considered introducing a 5 year limit for non-white immigrants but thought better of it at the last minute.

“In order to change the public mood and prepare the British people for new legislation that would, in effect strip non-white immigrants of their rights of entry and settlement, successive British governments set about gathering information that was intended to prove that black settlers represented a social problem.”

Five internal investigative studies were launched in the 1950s by both Labour and Tories, all of which set out to define and delineate the problems caused to the country by the presence of black migrants and demonstrate the negative effects the host population might face if black people continued to arrive in significant numbers. No comparable investigations were directed at the European Voluntary Workers from the Displaced Persons Camp. The final investigation set up in December 1953, was carried out by the *Working Party on Coloured People seeking employment in the United Kingdom*. The report, says Olusoga, “makes shocking reading today”. It suggested that 'coloured workers' struggled to find employment because of their “irresponsibility, quarrelsomeness and lack of discipline”. Black men were “slow mentally” and in general “not up to the standard required by British employers”. This flew in the face of reality as British employers were actively recruiting workers from the West Indies. By 1956 London Transport had begun recruiting in Jamaica and Barbados and British Rail were advertising in Barbados. The NHS was appealing for West Indian women to come to Britain and train as nurses. Ironically, Enoch Powell, who was Minister of Health from 1960 to 1963, was involved in the recruitment campaign!

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced *separate tiers* of British passports. Those issued by colonial governments or governors were subject to immigration controls upon entering

Britain. The Act also introduced restrictions on the number of black people from the new commonwealth permitted to enter the country each year. Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour leader, condemned the Act as “cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation”. However, in 1965 Labour MP Richard Crossman could write in his diary that

“Ever since the Smethwick bye-election¹ it has been quite clear that immigration can be the greatest potential vote loser for the Labour Party *if we are seen to be permitting a flood of immigrants coming in and the blight the central areas of our cities...*We have become illiberal and lowered the quotas at a time when we have an acute shortage of labour...We felt we would have to out-trump the Tories by doing what they would have done and so transforming their policy into a bi-partisan policy.”

The Wilson Labour government did introduce the Race Relations Act to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race and made incitement to racial hatred a criminal offence. However, further Acts in 1968 (under Wilson) and 1971 (under Heath) removed the last remnants of the rights of entry and residence that had been awarded by Commonwealth citizens by the 1948 Nationality Act.

Rivers of blood

Olusoga deals with the infamous Enoch Powell '[rivers of blood](#)' speech with its classical allusion to the river Tiber foaming with blood. For Powell no black person could really be English, even if born here. “The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England become an Englishman.” Prime Minister Ted Heath did have the good grace to sack Powell. In response 2,000 dockers downed tools in support of Powell. They marched from the East End to the Palace of Westminster carrying placards in support of him and proclaiming “Back Britain not Black Britain.” Meat porters at Smithfield market submitted a petition containing 92 pages of signatures in his support. Some of his supporters partook in a wave of assaults against black people. Homes were attacked and burning crosses appeared outside the homes of some black people. Repatriation of black people would have had to have been on a large scale since by the mid-1970s 40% of the black population were British born.

In 1978 Margaret Thatcher, in a TV programme uttered her words about British culture being “swamped”.

“...people are rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture, and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.”

In fact by 1979 immigrants accounted for just 4% of the population.

Racism and state racism

The story of the racism that West Indian and other immigrants suffered during the 1950s and onwards is well known. Prior to the Race Relations Act it was ok to refuse to rent to black people. The colour bar was operated in many workplaces and pubs/clubs. Picking up on the civil rights struggles in the USA, the [Bristol bus boycott](#) was a pivotal moment in breaking the colour bar. It was necessary to break the resistance of the union branch to employing black people as well. The TGWU branch passed a resolution in 1955 to ban 'coloured' people from working as bus conductors and drivers. National union officers turned a blind eye to it. Under the growing impact of the campaign the company was forced to end the bar in August 1963.

Another struggle was the strike at [Imperial Typewriters](#) in Leicester The action was triggered by an Asian woman being mistakenly given the pay packet of a white worker. Although the same

¹ This was an infamous election when the Tory candidate produced a leaflet which said 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour'.

grade as the white worker she discovered she was being paid less. A walkout was staged by 39 workers, mostly women, but the grievances of others (around 1,100 of 1,600 workers were Asian²) saw the dispute grow. Around the country shops selling Imperial Typewriters were picketed.

Although the outcome wasn't successful as in Bristol, nevertheless it showed that Asian workers were prepared to fight for equality. In August 1974, strikers returned to work after 14 weeks on the picket line. Within a few months the factory ceased production at both the Leicester and Hull plants, making thousands redundant. Former strikers' feelings about the dispute were mixed. Some found life difficult after the strike and took years to find work. But many also talked about the way the strike had changed them.

The 1980s rebellions

Racist treatment of black people in Britain was endemic. There is a host of black people who have died in police custody and no officers being held accountable. The rebellions in Brixton, Handsworth, Moss Side, Toxteth, were in response to the heavy handed use of the 'sus' laws (Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824). The Metropolitan police began an operation ostensibly against violent street crime in Brixton. "With breath-taking insensitivity that revealed the depth of racism with the force" the Met called the operation 'Swamp 81'. Liverpool's Chief Constable suggested that the underlying cause of the 'riots' was "the problem of half-castes in Liverpool". The mixed race residents were described as "the product of liaisons between black seamen and white prostitutes".

In contrast with the 'race riots' of 1921 which were attacks on black population by white mobs, these uprisings as they were called were fought by young black people in response to years of oppression and prejudice.

Windrush, the myths

In his final chapter David Olusoga deals with the period since 2012 when a model of the Empire Windrush was included in the Olympic ceremony. He suggests that the Windrush story as presented in British history has the capacity to obscure the real history. The 'Windrush myth' obscures the long history of black people in Britain and the fact that it was not just a history of Black settlement in Britain but the interaction of Britons with Africans on three continents. Since the start of the 1980s Britain has undergone a second wave of black migration. Between the two censuses of 2001 and 2011 the British African population doubled. Millions of white people have been drawn into black family networks. Less than half of West Indians have partners who are West Indian. This has helped to undermine the endemic racism. In London by 2015 44% of Londoners were officially classed as black or minority ethnic.

"The successes and achievements have been remarkable and in many ways unexpected. The problem is that these good news stories can at times become window dressing and inspire wishful thinking... the reality is that disadvantages are still entrenched and discrimination remains rife."

The reality of the lives of black people in Britain, the material disadvantages and the discrimination they face are so well known that they don't need repeating here. The discrimination is faced in the workplace, in the jobs that they tend to do, and notably by the way they are treated by the police. The "hostile environment" introduced by Teresa May demanded of doctors and nurses that they carry out checks before offering people treatment in NHS hospitals. As Olusoga says Britain was turned into "a nation of ersatz border guards". A deport first and ask questions later philosophy was adopted.

Defending the Empire

2 11,000 Ugandan Asians moved to Leicester.

The global response to the horrific killing of George Floyd was manifested in Britain. Whilst it was a response to the harsh realities of racism in the USA it expressed the frustration with the reality of racism in Britain and its place in British history. Olusoga says

“It was fitting that what became a moment of national awakening to Black British history erupted in Bristol, the port that in the eighteenth century had briefly overtaken London as the centre of the Atlantic slave trade.”

Edward Colston was Deputy Governor of the Royal Africa Company, the monopoly company that had been among the first operators of the slave fortress on Bunce Island in Sierra Leone. The merchant elite of Bristol celebrated Colston as a philanthropist, his role in the slave trade forgotten. The Colston statue is described by Olusoga as “part of the great infrastructure of amnesia and obfuscation that has long functioned to airbrush the realities of slavery and the slave trade out of mainstream British history.” The dumping of the Colston statue into the Bristol harbour precipitated a polarised discussion in which the miscreants were condemned for breaking the law. To their eternal shame the four Labour MPs in Bristol issued a statement calling for them to be prosecuted. Yet nobody was injured and the statue was rescued from its watery grave and put in a museum. Olusoga is surely right when he describes the toppling of the statue as “a long delayed historical reckoning”.

The war against 'woke' is very much a defence of the British Empire. Imperialism created a mentality of superiority. British imperialism was saturated with white supremacy, the 'superior' races of which Churchill spoke. Britain did not create its empire to improve the world but to extract wealth from the countries it ruled over. The Atlantic slave trade could only be built if Africans were considered to be less than human. The brutality of the British ruling class was reflected in events like the [Amritsar](#) massacre and the barbarous treatment of Kenyans in suppressing the [Mau Mau rebellion](#). Although General Dyer who supervised the Amritsar carnage was retired on half pay the Cabinet refused to have him prosecuted. A fund for him raised £26,000 and he was praised by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury who called him “a brave, public spirited, patriotic soldier.”

Just recently Shadow Defence Secretary denounced the Russian state as imperialist in response to its invasion of Ukraine. But Labour has a blind spot when it comes to British imperialism. Whilst the Attlee government had its progressive side (founding the NHS and its council house building programme) its leaders were imperialists with prejudices against black people, and envisaged the maintenance of the Empire, with those countries directly ruled, eventually (when Britain thought they were ready) becoming Dominions, like Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

There was nothing progressive about the British Empire. It ruthlessly exploited the countries which it dominated. White supremacy was part of its ideology. One of the ways in which the country clings to the myths of the British Empire is the giving of 'gongs' in the name of an Empire which no longer exists. The arrogance of the British ruling class, its sense of its own self-importance, is expressed in its clinging to grandiose delusions of Britain being “a world power”. Those in the labour movement who revere these fripperies fail to face up to the real historical record and to challenge the racism which still persists to this day. David Olusoga's book helps us to understand the imperial roots of that racism.

Martin Wicks
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