

BLACK EDWARDIANS

*Black People
in Britain
1901–1914*



JEFFREY GREEN

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FRANK CASS
LONDON • PORTLAND, OR.

First Published in 1998 in Great Britain by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
2 Park Square, Milton Park,
Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and in the United States of America by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
270 Madison Ave,
New York NY 10016

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

Website <http://www.frankcass.com>

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Green, Jeffrey
Black Edwardians : Black people in Britain, 1901–1914
1. Blacks – Great Britain – History – 20th century 2. Blacks
– Great Britain – Social conditions 3. Great Britain –
History – Edward VII, 1901–1910
I. Title
305.8'96'041'09041

ISBN 0–7146–4871–X (cloth)
ISBN 0–7146–4426–9 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Green, Jeffrey, 1944–
Black Edwardians : Black people in Britain, 1901–1914 / Jeffrey
Green.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–7146–4871–X (cloth). – ISBN 0–7146–4426–9 (pbk.)
1. Blacks – Great Britain – History – 20th century. 2. Great
Britain – History – Edward VII, 1901–1910. 3. Great Britain – History –
George V, 1910–1936. I. Title.
DA125.A1G69 1998
941'.00496–dc21 98–16242
CIP

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Typeset by Footnote Graphics, Warminster, Wilts

For Susan, Sue and George

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Acknowledgements

EVIDENCE of the Black presence in the British Isles is spread widely. Much has been retrieved through the families and friends of the people detailed in these pages, who agreed to be interviewed, answered letters, and loaned documents and photographs. My understanding owes a great deal to Frank and Evelyn Alcindor, Amy Barbour-James, Leslie Brown, Olive Campbell, Percy Chen, Joe Deniz, Geoffrey Dove, Marjorie Evans, Ronald Green, Don Johnson, Margaret Othick, Richard Savage and Leslie Thompson.

I am indebted to the following individuals who provided clues and evidence, and shared information: Tony Barker and Stephen Bourne for information on entertainers; Peter Calvert for his contacts with Yorkshire veterans who spoke about the pygmies; Marva Carter who took me to the Herndon Home in Atlanta; E. B. Davies of Walthamstow School who led me to two veterans in 1983; Ian Duffield for copies of the correspondence of John Archer; Christopher Fyfe for his knowledge of Sierra Leone and his discovery of the tombstone of Dr D. P. H. Taylor in Banjul; James Gibbs for details of African students at Queens College, Taunton; my ex-wife Maureen for finding postcards; Robert A. Hill for informing me of Thomas Johnson's 1908 autobiography; Christopher Jackson of the Children's Society, London; David Killingray for information on Amgoza Lobagola, Klikko and Bandle Omoniyi; Hazel King and Ivor Wynne Jones for details of the African Institute, Colwyn Bay; Bernth Lindfors for copies and gifts of showbusiness ephemera, and for telling me that Ira Aldridge papers were in Evanston, Illinois; Rainer Lotz for information on entertainers who travelled around Europe, notably James and George Bohee, Belle Davis, Louis Douglas and Will Garland; Josephine Love whose hospitality enabled me to use the Azalia Hackley Collection in Detroit, and for her explanation of the vibrant community life in Atlanta in the 1900s; Doris McGinty for searching street directories of Washington DC; Barbara Ponton for details on Thomas Johnson; Paul Reed for information on Black men in the British army in 1914; Howard Rye for sharing the results of his searches in street directories, birth and marriage registers, and other details of entertainers; Donald Simpson

for leading me to Amy Barbour-James and guidance at the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society; and Brian Willan, authority on South Africa, who provided evidence located in Nigeria that convinced me that Dr J. J. Brown needed a full investigation.

Archivists and local studies librarians searched and permitted me to search in street directories, scrap books, electoral registers, burial registers, catalogues and local newspapers. Cemetery records led me to the family of Dr Alcindor. Wanderings in graveyards supplied the fresh air that is the only disadvantage when working in those wonderful institutions, the newspaper library of the British Library, the London Library, Rhodes House (Oxford), and the Public Record Office.

I am grateful for the staff of the Schomburg branch of the New York Public Library, the public libraries of Boston, Dallas, and Detroit, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and the library of Howard University, and Northwestern University for assistance during my time in the United States.

My thanks to Paul McGilchrist for inviting me to visit the Royal College of Music archives with him, in search of Coleridge-Taylor; to Bill Tonkin of the Exhibition Study Group for a free run of his postcard collection; David Clifford for sharing his enthusiasm for the music of Coleridge-Taylor; and to Christopher Fyfe for reading the draft manuscript and for his excellent recommendations.

Introduction

IT has long been presumed that the Black people who could be found in Britain in the first decades of the twentieth century were students destined to return home when qualified, or sailors who had found temporary homes in cities close to the sea and ships. Others were a handful of doctors and semi-permanent students, entertainers usually from the United States, and visiting delegations seeking greater understanding. A few; people of no consequence except when colonial agitators or unemployment stirred discontent. Which was all very comforting to the masters.

Reality was quite different. A veritable gazetteer of place names of the British Isles had a Black presence in Edwardian times. Wrexham, Colwyn Bay and Swansea in Wales; the cathedral city of Lincoln, the island of Jersey and the south coast resort town of Bournemouth are some of the places where Black people have now been traced. York, Leeds, Harrogate, Bradford, Beverley, Hull and Scarborough in Yorkshire had Black residents or visitors, as did the outer areas of London including Acton, Edgware, Leytonstone and Croydon. Rural areas with a Black presence included Hampshire, Wiltshire, Cornwall, the Lake District, St Albans and Sussex towns such as Rye, Brighton and Crawley. Dublin, Belfast, Newry, Cork, Ennis and Fermoy in Ireland; towns such as Dundee, Manchester, Aberdeen, Grimsby, West Hartlepool and Wigan had Black residents.

Edwardian Britain's widespread population of African birth or descent was resident at the centre of the world's largest empire, participating in the affairs of the leading industrial nation. Some knew no other land and others were self-motivated migrants. There were ambitious professionals, youths anxious for an education, parents concerned about the future, adults seeking tranquility and workers seeking more money, as well as the descendants of earlier generations. All of this was a surprise to me as I followed up clues in papers I first handled in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1979.

It was jazz historian John Chilton who first alerted me to the London years of Edmund Jenkins, a South Carolina-born musician who had studied in Atlanta before moving to England in 1914. Like many

instrumentalists of the 1920s jazz era he had been trained at the orphanage in Charleston founded by his Baptist minister father.¹ Edmund Jenkins progressed to study at London's Royal Academy of Music from 1914 to 1921, where he won prizes, medals and scholarships.² Tracking his friends revealed a middle-class Black community in Britain reaching back into the late Victorian years. I spoke to the children of people born in Victorian times: 1867, 1873 and the 1880s (and even 1856).³ This was my grandparents' generation.

I rediscovered something that my grandmother had made clear to me when, around 1962, I was studying history at school. She had been adult when King Edward had reigned; I was reading about the 1910s campaign for women's votes. She told me that she had worked, as a servant, for a Votes For Women suffragette (Martha Louisa Vass always called them suffragists) whose protests included chaining herself to railings in London. Grandma Vass remarked that she worked every day, late into the night when there were dinner parties, and had just one Sunday afternoon off every second week. Women's rights based on women's wrongs had no place in my textbooks.

Her neighbour told me, when I asked him what he had done on a Saturday night when he had been my age, that he had put on his best boots and walked to Mayfair to see 'what the toffs were doing'. This was another working class to that in my school books. When I stumbled over the Black presence in Edwardian Britain I was thus slightly prepared to face facts not found in history books.

What delayed a proper investigation was a deep-seated belief, one that was and is widespread in Britain, that people of African birth or descent were 'from' somewhere else and thus could only be in Britain on a temporary basis. Such sojourners had no place in the history of Britain, it seemed. This was innocently encouraged by studies of the Black people who had led their peoples to independence, for the triumphs of the early leaders of Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica had followed years abroad, often in Britain.⁴ They were known through their writings and biographies, whereas little was known of humbler individuals.

The interconnections of Black leaders in Britain, France and the United States, detailed in Imanuel Geiss's *The Pan-African Movement* of 1974⁵ and Ayo Langley's *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa* of 1973⁶ showed that Black people had long made links outside Africa and the Caribbean – the colonial lands where the Black majority had no votes, few rights, no control and little influence.

But mundane matters such as finding accommodation, paying the rent and earning a living had not been addressed – let alone what it must have been like to experience a sense of isolation as a person of colour in a White society. And were there other aspects to the Black

experience of Britain? Surely there were Black people whose lives, like my grandmother's, received little public attention. Grandma Vass knew next to nothing about Africa, as I discovered in 1968 when I told her my employers were sending me to Uganda. When I lived in Kampala it was something of a surprise for me to be accused of exploiting Africa and Africans through imperialism. My response, that Britain's tropical empire had been of no benefit to my grandparents and their children, and that my presence in Uganda six years after independence was due to an official work permit, did not really resolve the matter.

I spent months travelling around the United States, an ambition created by my interest in jazz and the Black culture which had nurtured it. On returning to London in 1971 I started to read histories of Whites in Africa and biographies of the Victorian traveller-explorers who had done so much to stimulate British involvement in tropical Africa. I was attempting to discover why the British had ruled Uganda, and other African lands, with such apparent ease. Meanwhile the men and women who had worked with me in Kampala were being murdered, robbed, forced into exile: for Idi Amin had seized power and had instituted a tyranny that surely surpassed the British empire. Had this resulted from British imperialism?

After all, British imperialism in Uganda began officially in 1894 – within a lifetime of 1971. It was possible that children who, in the 1880s, had witnessed Stanley emerge from the rainforests of the Congo to reach Lake Albert, could have celebrated Uganda's independence. I read a biography of Harry Johnston, linguist, artist, writer and early governor of Uganda. In 1982 I met an elderly man, sunning himself on a bench in the Sussex churchyard where Johnston had been buried in 1927. I asked him where the grave was, and that led to conversation. He had known Johnston – Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston, knighted by Queen Victoria, whose land laws had affected my work in Kampala. 'That little bugger', he said – suddenly I was back in Grandma Vass's home and hearing another version of history.

I became less surprised by aspects of history I had not anticipated. In seeking information on Edmund Jenkins, who lived in London and Paris from 1914 until his death in 1926, I had assumed that veterans would easily recall an American of pure African descent whose accent must have been similar to the then US president Jimmy Carter. I discovered that some who had sound memories had forgotten Jenkins was black. This was true of other Black people in the memory of Whites – strikingly when a 1930s group photograph had the sole Black male arrowed to guide me. It was not an African descent that veterans recalled. I tried to assess if this ethnic invisibility resulted from wishful thinking, and concluded that generally race had not been among the

main reasons for the person to be recalled. Indeed, I started to believe that Black people had been part of the British landscape.

One way of checking was to ask veterans; nearly every person I have met in Britain, when asked, recalled Black people before the 1940s. Marjorie Evans recalled west Africans in traditional cloth in Edwardian Croydon; Leslie Brown told me about his doctor father who lived in London from 1905, and of S. S. A. Cambridge and his three daughters in the 1910s. Pop Chandler remembered West Indian soldiers near Bethune in France in the winter of 1917, and my father told me that he had seen members of Louis Armstrong's orchestra in south London around 1934. A veteran in Epsom recalled Dr Harold Moody and Dr Gunn Munro before 1936, and another in Cheshire volunteered that a West Indian doctor named Donaldson had practised in Manchester in the 1930s. Councillor Edward Nelson was remembered in Cheshire. The sporting fraternity recalled boxer Len Johnson, born in Manchester in 1902. I ceased noting those who had thrilled to the singing of Paul Robeson in the 1930s, and those who had met the racing tipster Prince Monolulu. I understood why the children's street game of 'Touch a Nigger for Luck'⁷ had survived generation after generation. There had been a widespread and continuous Black presence in Britain for years.

There was no major research into this Black presence in Britain's history until Kenneth Little's *Negroes in Britain*, published in 1948.⁸ Little had studied the 'coloured community in the dockland of Cardiff' which he numbered at some seven thousand. Suggesting that 'Negro people had become established in small numbers during the '90s' he then detailed events in Cardiff after the 1914-18 war. The second part of his book was an overview of the Black presence in Britain from the sixteenth century. Recent books have also avoided the Edwardian period, which was a period of change.

By the 1910s both Germany and the United States had overtaken Britain's economy, and had a substantial lead in modern industries, notably electrical engineering, chemicals and vehicles. But Britain's financial investments around the world, in shipping, railways, banking, insurance, and trade remained colossal. One quarter of the globe's population dwelled in lands that were part of the British Empire. Those lands and investments made Britain the envy of the world and the Edwardians were rightly proud of that status.

Pride in the empire did not mean knowledge of it and its peoples, for widespread ignorance was exhibited in the newspapers of the 1900s and 1910s. This helped my research, as I followed a path that would worry some historians. I looked at the yellowing pages of old newspapers, usually weeklies published in some town in a district where I had not located a Black presence through other sources. More

times than not I found a report on the activities of a Black person.

Even when focusing on one aspect of Black activity in Britain I sped read other pages and found additional aspects of Black history. One example was the American song-and-dance show *In Dahomey*, a London theatrical success of 1903. The *Westminster Gazette's* 'A Colour Line in London? Publicans and "Nigger" Customers' of September 1903 revealed anti-Black actions in central London; the *Daily News* noted 'The Coloured Man's Complaint'. I then looked in the *London Weekly Dispatch* and found 'Black Man's Rights. Racial Question In the West End. Complaint Against a Publican'. My *In Dahomey* research was published in a New York music journal.⁹ I met Paul B. Rich and mentioned this colour-bar incident, and he recommended I approached Sheila Patterson, who edited *New Community* for the Commission for Racial Equality in London. My research paper was accepted and duly published.¹⁰

It was the first of several articles that dealt with Black people active outside the field of music. The acceptance of these articles and the encouragement of professional historians confirmed that what I was uncovering was both of value and often quite unknown.

I also spent time reading memoirs, biographies and letters of people, centred on the 1900s and 1910s, but soon without such a time restraint. I noted that Black people were mentioned from time to time. Sometimes they were not mentioned but appeared anyway, as with the photograph of 'Nursemaid at the seaside, c. 1896' in Frank Dawes's *Not in Front of the Servants: Domestic service in England 1850-1939* (1975).

A biography of Charles Darwin revealed that the future author of *Origin of Species* had studied taxidermy, in 1820s Edinburgh, with a 'blackamoor' named John Edmonstone from British Guiana.¹¹ Ruth McClure's *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (1981) noted that this charity had taken in 'a mulatto child and also the child of Black Peggy, a Negro girl'. In the mid-nineteenth century the Russian writer Alexander Herzen took refuge in London where he met and employed 'a Negro, a lad of seventeen'.¹² Among the ninety-four who sailed from England with Captain James Cook in the *Endeavour* in 1768, a round-the-world voyage that brought knowledge of Australia and New Zealand to the British, were botanist Joseph Banks and his four servants – two were Black: Thomas Richmond and George Dorrton.¹³

The Diary of a Prison Governor: James William Newham, 1825-1890 seemed unpromising but the entry for 18 June 1887 recorded the death in Canterbury prison of Arthur Roberts 'a negro prisoner' who had almost completed a fifteen month sentence for uttering counterfeit coins.¹⁴ A history of Llandudno, the Welsh seaside resort, noted that around 1900 the town's 'first coloured immigrant came as a storeman

at the turn of the century. He was Joe Taylor who married and settled down after arriving in the area with a travelling fair.¹⁵

The memoirs of poet Osbert Sitwell noted a 'negro, locally known as "Snowball", who limped with a pitiful exoticism through the winter streets, trying to sell flowers' in Scarborough at the turn of the century and that his elder brother had a rug, 'unusual in design and bold in colour, he had commissioned at the age of seven from an old negro whom he found in the workhouse at Scarborough'.¹⁶

Seventeenth century English music provided 'The Fair Lover and His Black Mistress' in which Nigrocella, from the West Indies, is serenaded 'Were I as black as Leda's hair, You should not thus endure'. Composer John Blow had been the organist at Westminster Abbey.¹⁷

Newspapers revealed details that I could follow up elsewhere, although their references to Black people were often because of crimes or alleged crimes. Newspaper reports were generally patronising, often offensive, but they provided valuable clues.

Basic education had been introduced across England in the 1870s and most Edwardians were literate. All manner of publications were aimed at the masses. Metropolitan scandal sheets such as the *Illustrated Police News* carried reports of serious accidents, crimes and allegations of crimes, adding a literal touch of colour if the incident involved a Black person. An October 1907 report noted:

Attacked by a lion. An exciting scene occurred at a circus at Newport on Thursday night. A negro lion-tamer was leaving a cage in which he had been putting a lion through some tricks when the animal sprang at him and caught him by the arm. He released himself, but not before his arm had been badly mauled.¹⁸

Other publications, such as *The Sphere* and *Tatler*, sought a different audience. A mid-1905 edition of the former, which had four pages devoted to King Edward's grand-nephew's marriage (he was the Crown Prince of Germany) and three to the Spanish king's visits to France and Britain, included a splendid photograph of 'An African Diplomatist Presented to the King', showing 'The Hon. J. J. Thomas, who was presented at the recent levee held by his Majesty, is a member of the Sierra Leone House of Assembly'.¹⁹

The provincial press noted incidents involving Blacks that had taken place outside the circulation area of the newspaper. Thus in 1905 a north Yorkshire newspaper reported on an incident in Lincolnshire, fifty miles away. 'Three persons stabbed by a Negro at Grimsby' was the headline. The short report named him as William Savoury.²⁰ When an African American was awarded a scholarship to Oxford it

was mentioned in London's sports press.²¹ A breach of promise court case in Scotland was reported in distant Yorkshire.²²

Evidence of the Black presence was scattered. It was easy to see why much of it had been missed.

Much of the writing that passes as the history of Black people is on the themes of slavery, exploitation of Africa and of Africans, plantation society, anti-slavery protest and anti-colonial protest. Their focus is largely on the lives of Black people but not on Black people in Britain. However, even the apparently clear cut exploitation of Blacks by Whites has not been free of myths. Nowadays no informed person would state, as history professor Sir Reginald Coupland did in 1933, that 'all slaves in England . . . were recognized as free men' from 1772, for Black people remained subject to their slave status in Britain into the late 1820s.²³ This myth of a liberal and free Britain survived into very recent times.

Other myths have had a long life and still affect perceptions of people in history. The myth of Britain's all-powerful global empire has not entirely disappeared. New legends are being formed, new history is being developed. For the majority of people in late twentieth-century Britain the Black presence is very recent, stemming from the migrations that began in 1948 as Little's book was published.

A study of early twentieth-century Britain's Black residents and visitors, many of whom were alive in 1948, suggests that the migrations following the 1939–45 war might have followed a pattern. But people from the tropical empire who, over the centuries, had moved to the British Isles did not fit into any historical niche once coercion, notably in the centuries of slavery, had ended. Failing to find evidence of a later Black presence in Britain has warped history.

The result has been a simplified version of Black British history; those Blacks who lived in Britain before the 1830s were victims of an imperial and slaving society. Those who influenced the move towards African and Caribbean independence were freedom fighters.

The nature of empire was hardly questioned. How could there have been sufficient force to intimidate the millions all the time? How did so few rule so many? The image of a White world dominating Blacks received a blow when I was informed by Amy Barbour-James, born of pure-African descent in London in 1906, that her Guyana-born father had been an officer in the Gold Coast [Ghana] post office. A study of colonial records, both printed and in the Colonial Office files at the Public Record Office in Kew, revealed that he had been one of dozens of Black West Indians working in the African empire. Had they all made a home in England, like John Barbour-James? How was it that he and the other Black colonial officials had been overlooked? Like the memoirs and the newspapers, the evidence was to hand.

The *Gold Coast Report for 1904* noted that the police had 'four West Indian superintendents' and the annual *Blue Book* named them as T. S. Coppins, A. W. Downer, W. H. Simmons and C. T. Webb. The earliest appointment, that of Thomas Coppins, dated from 1898. Five years later the report stated that 'a proportion of the sanitary inspectors will, in the first instance, be drawn from the West Indies'. The *Gold Coast Civil Service List, 1909* noted West Indian teachers and sub-officers of police 'seconded from the West Indies'. Yet the 'European population' of the Gold Coast was only 1,715 in 1909.²⁴ This did not seem the all-powerful empire of legend. Was the empire sustained by myths? It must have been; and those myths still have influence.

Because the empire was such a dominating force, there was no prohibition against Black visitors and settlers in Britain. If visible minorities in Britain experienced substantial elements of racism and culture-conflict, what stopped that information reaching back to the tropics? If the King Edward's imperial domains were underfunded, his subjects milched and their economies warped in the interests of Britons, what had financed the travellers and settlers?

How could a Black minority earn a living if the majority of Britons despised them? How had it been possible for Amy Barbour-James to lead a life that was in no large way different to that of Whites? Indeed, did the majority despise the Black people who lived among them? Perhaps no Whites in Britain worried about Blacks? Was it better to be Black and in Britain than to live in the tropical empire? Such questions were raised as I discovered more about the men, women and children of African birth or descent who had found a home in Britain in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century.

Black people were active in many ways and in many places, in early twentieth-century Britain, overcoming encounters with racism, bigotry, ignorance and bias at all levels. Even the small adults from the Congo rain forest, who appeared in a demeaning display in theatres and halls all over Britain for more than two years, triumphed as people despite the odds.²⁵

My contacts with the children, neighbours and friends of Black Edwardians involved reaching back into the nineteenth century. This was not a just a search in archives, old newspapers and memoirs, but an often spirited contact with witnesses. One example was when I investigated the Congo pygmies. I was introduced to two ladies in their nineties who remembered the Africans living in their Yorkshire village in 1905-7. Edwardian history, as my grandmother had made clear, was not that long ago.

East Grinstead
November 1996 – June 1997

NOTES

1. J. Chilton, *A Jazz Nursery: The Story of the Jenkins' Orphanage Bands* (London: Bloomsbury Bookshop, 1980).
2. J. Green, *Edmund Thornton Jenkins: The Life and Times of an American Black Composer 1894-1926* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).
3. The mother of Marjorie Evans (half-sister of Anglo-African composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor) had been born in Dover in 1856. Her Black son was born in London in 1875. She died in 1953 and my informant, Miss Evans, was expecting to celebrate a life of one hundred years in November 1996, as this was written.
4. Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta had studied in the 1930s London and worked in Sussex; Julius Nyerere had studied in Edinburgh before leading Tanganyika at independence; Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikwe studied and taught in the USA in the 1920s; Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah also studied in America; Trinidad's Eric Williams studied at Oxford and taught in the USA; Jamaica's Norman Manley studied at Oxford.
5. I. Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement* (London: Methuen, 1974).
6. J. Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa 1900-1945: A Study in Ideology and Social Classes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).
7. The first child to touch a Black person walking along the street was deemed to have acquired good luck for the remainder of the day. One version necessitated spitting on the pavement first, and was explained to me in 1981 by a Paddington veteran recalling the 1910s, who was full of respect for the local 'Black doctor', John Alcindor, who had died in 1924.
8. K. Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations in English Society* (London: Kegan Paul, 1948).
9. J. Green, 'In Dahomey in London in 1903', *Black Perspective in Music* (New York), 11, 1 (Spring 1983), pp. 22-40.
10. J. Green, 'The Coloured Man's Complaint', *New Community* (London), 11, 1/2 (Autumn 1983), pp. 175-8.
11. A. Desmond and J. Moore, *Darwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), pp. 28, 91.
12. A. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts* quoted by E. Newby (ed.), *A Book of Travellers Tales* (London: Picador Books, 1986), pp. 229-30.
13. P. O'Brien, *Joseph Banks: A Life* (London, 1987; repr. Collins Harvill, 1994), p. 68.
14. P. Coltman (ed.), *The Diary of a Prison Governor* (Kent County Council, 1984), p. 37.
15. I. Jones, *Llandudno: Queen of the Welsh Resorts* (Cardiff: John Jones, 1971), pp. 53-4.
16. O. Sitwell, *Left Hand Right Hand!* (London: Macmillan; Reprint Society, 1946), p. 87; O. Sitwell *The Scarlet Tree* (London: Macmillan; Reprint Society, 1951), p. 287.
17. Harmonia Mundi recording HMO 215. My thanks to Stewart Pearson.
18. *Illustrated Police News* (London), 26 October 1907, p. 2.
19. *The Sphere* (London), 10 June 1905, p. 236.
20. *Scarborough Evening News*, 7 August 1905, p. 3.
21. *The Sporting Times* (London), 23 March 1907, p. 2; J. Green, 'A Black Edwardian Rhodes Scholar', *Oxford* (Oxford), 40, 2 (December 1988), pp. 71-6.
22. *Beverley Guardian*, 14 October 1905, 'Edinburgh lady and a Negro Doctor'; see index: Dr Nurse.
23. F. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1974).
24. *Gold Coast Report for 1909*, pp. 30-31 notes mining companies employed 585, merchants numbered 574, officials were 438 and that missions numbered 118. These reports and lists were consulted at the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, then in London.
25. J. Green, 'Edwardian Britain's Forest Pygmies', *History Today* (London), 45, 8 (August 1995), pp. 33-9.

Imperial exhibits

THERE was uncertainty. Did the nineteenth century end on 31 December 1899, or one year later? That it was the end of an era was clear when Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901, for she had ruled Britain since 1837. Her son and heir was to be crowned Edward the Seventh, monarch of the world's leading nation state which claimed imperial rights over one quarter of the inhabitants of the globe.

His coronation was to be a splendid affair, a ceremony that might outclass the old queen's jubilee of 1897. Kings, rajahs, presidents, chiefs, emperors and prime ministers were summoned to witness the coronation. Indian troops were brought to Southampton to wait their moment when they would join in the parade before hundreds of thousands of spectators. Medals, ribbons, spurs, helmets, shined brass and mirror-like boots: a splendid display of power. From the corners of the earth, from Africa, from Europe, from Asia, from America, came the curious, the rulers and the ruled.

The American socialist and novelist Jack London witnessed the coronation parade of 9 August 1902. He had been in London for some weeks, observing the poor in the East End. He wrote in *The People of the Abyss* that he would have enjoyed Edward's coronation had he arrived from America and stayed in a luxury hotel until the pageant. The socialist waited with countless others behind the soldiers who lined the route. He wrote that he was thinking that five hundred peers owned one-fifth of England and, with their colleagues and servants, spent nearly one-third of the country's wealth.

The king returned to his palace. The generals who had ridden in the parade had fought famous battles in India, Africa and China. Behind them came soldiers from Canada and Australia, from New Zealand and Bermuda, from Fiji, Borneo, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cyprus, Jamaica, Malta, Hong Kong, St Lucia, South Africa and India – warriors and lackeys, conquered peoples and proud settlers. The parade was almost over and the crowds were drifting away when Chinese and Africans marched along. They were cheered; and then the rain fell.

It was splendid, but merely decorative. Behind the pomp were

several myths and illusions. The very symbol of the British nation and its empire was half-German; and his queen was Danish. The generals, splendid on their horses, had taken years to defeat a few thousand White farmers. Indeed, in one week in 1899 the apparently mighty British had nearly been swept out of southern Africa. The cavalry, which prided itself of being elitist and was officered by aristocrats, had played no major part in that war and was never needed in battle again.

The five hundred land-owning aristocratic families who had upset Jack London were of lessening importance. Britain now had more people living in towns and cities than in the countryside, and much of its wealth was created by manufacturing industries and commerce. Edward's kingdom depended on coal; coal mining and distribution employed one male worker in ten. The nation's cotton mills depended on foreign cotton, largely American; its woollen mills relied on wool from the antipodes. These raw materials were transported in British-built ships, fuelled by Welsh coal, financed by British banks and insured in London.

The mass of Britons were literate, for compulsory education had been introduced in the 1870s. Conditions in towns were improving, with safe, uninterrupted water supplies to be found in nearly every town by the late 1890s.¹ There was a growth in legislation aimed at assisting the weakest members of society, leading to school meals (1906) and school medical inspections (1907).² Inexpensive urban transport systems enabled numbers of workers to move some distance from their employment, and a growing network of theatres provided entertainment for the multitudes. Gas and electricity were replacing oil lamps; horses were being replaced by petrol engines; the nation's railway network was almost complete; contacts were made through swift communications – letter, telegram and the telephone. Newspapers reported news from near and far, enabling the stick-at-homes to learn of events in distant lands including, of course, those in Britain's empire.

A child attending a British school in the 1900s could learn of the empire from Lionel Lyde's *A Geography of the British Empire*.³ Many did, for it was published in 1900 and had reached its eleventh edition by 1915. Professor Lyde's introduction proclaimed that the empire covered about one-fifth of the land of the globe and that Britain's merchant navy was equal to all the other countries in the world put together. Of Barbados Lyde wrote 'even negroes are obliged to work – on the plantations or in catching and salting flying-fish'.⁴ He made no mention of slavery. The size of Britain's tropical African empire was 'not known with any approach to accuracy' whilst 'the oldest possessions, Gambia and Sierra Leone, are also the least valuable'.⁵

Lyde detailed southern Africa with its new (founded 1885) city of

Johannesburg on the gold fields, and the lands to the north, then called Rhodesia after Cecil Rhodes who had financed the settlement of Europeans there in the 1890s. That invasion had led to war. The professor noted that 'the Matabili were savage warriors' and the 'Mashonas are peaceful to cowardice'. The stone ruins of Zimbabwe, here called 'Zimbabbye', were said to be 'probably of Persian origin'.⁶

Turning to tropical Africa the professor wrote that the Gold Coast had given a name to the English guinea coin but now exported gold dust, palm oil and rubber, ignoring the cocoa that was to make this Britain's richest tropical colony by the 1920s. East Africa was described on one page. Zanzibar's long involvement in the East African slave trade was mentioned, probably because the British had helped end it, whereas they had been major exploiters in the western African slave trade for three centuries.

There were other potent influences on the British view of Africa and Africans. Missionary tales were published in adult and youth editions. They and stories of British explorers in Africa were awarded as prizes in schools and dispersed at meetings.⁷

One of the most enduring images of Blacks had been created by the 1850s novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Descended from that anti-slavery book were numerous stage acts, songs and dramas. Following emancipation in the United States there were Cabin acts involving genuine Black people, although many Whites in burnt cork make-up continued to present libellous images of Blacks on the stage.⁸ Cabin shows, lively musical entertainments set in a bogus American South during plantation slavery times, were a standard part of Britain's entertainments. Blacked-up performers (Nigger Minstrels) in song-and-dance shows, often using *Uncle Tom's Cabin* themes, presented Blacks as foolish dandies, happy to sing and play the banjo. Hundreds earned a living in minstrel shows for decades.⁹

The minstrel acts included people of African descent. Other entertainments also presented genuine Black men, women and children to the British. Residents of any town that had a theatre would have had almost regular opportunities to see Black entertainers, and smaller towns had halls where touring groups and individuals earned a living. Spectacular public entertainments which ran for months brought both images and real people before the ticket-purchasing multitudes. These imperial exhibitions were in part a display of power. As with the coronation in 1902, groups of 'natives' were seen by crowds of Britons in the centuries-old tradition of parading captives from foreign lands as evidence of military success. In Edwardian Britain displays of Black people also supported the widespread belief that White people in general, and Britons in particular, were superior. Blacks, and Whites, in show business lived in the public eye, and their doings were

thought to be of interest. Reports in the press reveal aspects of the lives of imperial exhibits and display contemporary opinions.

The exotic African was to be seen in the lively show *Savage South Africa* in London in 1899.¹⁰ One of the performers in this enactment of the recent warfare between Rhodes's settlers and the Ndebele was Peter Lobengula. The show closed in 1900. Lobengula remained in Britain, touring to Manchester with his English fiancée Kitty Jewell. Reports that the pair were to marry led to newspaper comments 'Black scandal' and 'Black peril'; their divorce led to further comments, which reveal the prejudice of the British.

The Times of 28 January 1902 reported on the court hearing of the application for a dissolution of the marriage of Peter Lo-Ben and Florence Kate Lo-Ben formerly Jewell. He was accused of cruelty and adultery with a Maud Wilson. Described as the son of the late king of Matabeleland, he 'had been extremely cruel to the petitioner and at one time had bitten her finger, and another time had tried to stab her with an assegai'. The president of the court remarked 'Well, what did she expect. He was but a savage'. Lobengula was also said to have lived off her earnings as a prostitute.

The African married an Irish woman, settled in Salford near Manchester, worked as a coal miner and raised a family. He died of phthisis (a tuberculosis encouraged by coal dust) on 24 November 1913, shortly after obtaining the right to vote, for his country of origin was now a domain of the British empire. The local press was interested in the prince who had become a coal miner and that his claim for civil rights had involved the government minister for colonial affairs. 'Several coloured gentlemen' attended his funeral at Agecroft cemetery. By 1920 his widow and four children were buried there. Another son, who died in 1977, expressed no public interest in his father's royal status.

Another African who was an imperial exhibit was the man known as Frantz, or Klikko the Wild Dancing Bushman. On display in London in 1912, and again from October 1913 after a spell in France, the exploitation of the South African so upset a stagehand at the Palace theatre in Maidstone that he alerted the Aborigines' Protection Society.¹¹ The performer was traced to Gravesend and then to Cambridge. The act ended with the African being gagged and carried off the stage, jerking convulsively and foaming at the mouth. A novel public performance to many, but an outrage to the stagehand and to the liberal protection society, it was so disquieting to the Variety Artistes' Federation that it blacklisted the act, which remained within the law. The African and his manager appeared in East Ham (London) and in the summer of 1914 at Dublin's world's fair. His photograph was published as a postcard.¹² He was still working, in Margate, in 1915.

Such 'savage' Blacks were not the only manner in which Edwardian Britons saw citizens of the empire. Much larger audiences saw some forty Jamaicans in London in the summer of 1905. The band of the West India Regiment played at the Crystal Palace exhibition centre for several weeks, to a possible audience of 966,325, the total of paying visitors to the exhibition.¹³

The year before 2,417,928 entry tickets had been sold for the City of Bradford Exhibition, where 'the most interesting black race in the world' was displayed. Men, women and children from Somalia lived in the grounds of the exhibition for the summer months, carrying out, in public, a range of activities that were pictured on at least nine postcards sold at the show. The 'native doctor' Chakim, his wife and six children are posed in one picture. Thirteen women and children appear on another; eleven adults are on a third card. Five are a 'native family'; fourteen children are posed at school. 'Washing day' has no adult males. One of these cards, mailed in Keighley on 17 October 1904, has the comment 'these people are what we saw at the exhibition last week but I do not care for them'.

These people were, in fact, seasoned entertainers, employed by the Continental Syndicate. A fire at the showground on 30 August damaged some of their accommodation, and the reports in the *Bradford Daily Telegraph* reveal something of the truth behind the image. Sultan Ali's apartments, a store room, and two apartments occupied 'by a couple of warriors and their families' were damaged by the fire. Personal belongings in the store room were valued at nearly three hundred pounds (the price of a modest house). The goods, which included items purchased in France, had been insured.

The exhibition closed at the end of October 1904. The *Bradford Daily Telegraph* duly reported on 'the tribe's departure', noting that half of the men wore 'English suits'. 'The manner in which they have "picked up" English . . . was astonishing.' Sultan Ali was quoted as stating that normally they traded sheep, and added that 'after their experience in Bradford they will not take kindly to the occupation. It is on the cards that the "village" will be a feature of the Liege Exhibition next year.' The reporter also noted that they had remained staunchly Muslim during their months in Yorkshire.

This was not their only strength. The paper had a headline 'Somalis Besiege the Town Hall', for a difference of opinion over gratuities had led many of the Africans to seek redress at the city's town hall. Because of this demonstration the group were late for their train. The two carriages reserved for the Somalis and their belongings had to be uncoupled, and added to the next train to Hull. There was no disgrace over the demonstration, for the lord mayor and other august personages were at the station to bid them farewell. The 'Somali Village' had



*Somali War Dance,
Coronation Exhibition, London, 1911.*

1. Somalis on show in London, 1911

acted out a simple life in Africa but the Africans had taken advantage of their time in France and in England, and had not abandoned their faith or their sense of justice. It seems likely that those who went on to appear in Belgium had been in Britain, and probable that some at Bradford had toured abroad before.

In 1910 at least twenty-eight Somalis were in a village presentation at the Maritime Gardens in Portobello, Edinburgh. Postcards include one of four musicians. The following year saw Somalis at the Coronation Exhibition in London, when a postcard of seven men in an alleged war dance was sold.

The most famous of these African groups were the Senegalese, who certainly numbered over one hundred when they had their 'village' in London in the summer of 1908. Opening in May 1908, the Franco-British exhibition was in purpose-built grounds at the White City in west London. The *Evening News* commented that 'large eyes roll at you from ebony faces' and that 'the coloured lady who composes a meal of rice and scraps of meat serves it without cutlery. The black fingers of the family are thrust into the pot.' The leading African was Mamadou Seek and the priest was Assame Parge.¹⁴

The propriety of such living exhibitions was raised in *The Times*, which concluded that the 130 Senegalese, who had already been in France, were experienced; and that the government of France needed no gratuitous advice on how to run their empire.

There were photographic postcards, of course. The village itself, a blacksmith at his forge and two dozen Africans posed as 'the Senegalese at home' are some that have survived. The group that sailed from Liverpool for Africa in November included, according to the passenger list, fifty-eight adults, twenty-six aged between one and twelve, and two babies. The family names Sow and Benga were quite common.

Three African men, possibly from Durban in South Africa, were also photographed at the Franco-British Exhibition. They pulled rickshaws. There were other Blacks at the showgrounds, some visiting, for these exhibitions were immensely popular, being instructive and amusing. Other African elements could be found in the Gambian and Nigerian sections, the latter displaying Benin bronzes, tropical products and minerals. The Olympic Games of 1908 were held at the exhibition, but they lacked the media attention and mass audiences of more recent times.

When presenting African villages the promoters did not tell the public that the living exhibits were seasoned travellers and semi-professionals. The image was the reality. In the summer of 1908, fifty miles south of London, something of the reality became exposed. Struggling with spelling and lettering at his lodgings at 18, Kensington



2. Senegalese village at the Franco-British exhibition, 1908