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The World's War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire

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BLACK AND BRITISH

A FORGOTTEN HISTORY

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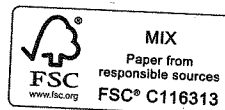
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Dedicated to the Memory of

Adesola Oladipupo Olusoga

&

Isaiah Gabriel Temidayo Olusoga

photographs and fingerprints that had to be produced to sign on for ships, a system copied and adopted by other ports. The Aliens Order of 1920 and Special Restrictions (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925 further required all black seamen domiciled in Britain, including British subjects, to register with the police and then prove their nationality. An initiative of the Home Office Aliens Department, this legislation has been described as 'the first instance of state-sanctioned race discrimination inside Britain to come to widespread notice'.⁷⁰ The 1925 order gave the police powers to stop black seamen as they landed in British ports and demand to see their documentation. However, sailors did not always carry passports and were not required to and so many black seamen had no means of proving their nationality. Those unable to demonstrate their status as British subjects, and those whose documentation was regarded by the police as unsatisfactory, were required to register as aliens, which made their potential deportation a far simpler process. Black British subjects, along with Indians and Arabs from the empire, were in this way exposed to the threat of deportation under a legislation that had been intended to control and limit the numbers of aliens.⁷¹ In Cardiff in the 1920s, men with passports, discharge papers from war service in the army or navy and even birth certificates, all demonstrating their status as British subjects, were forced by the police to register as aliens. One seaman who had his passport confiscated and issued with an Aliens Card was threatened with arrest when he refused to accept it.⁷² These restrictions and the spread of a colour bar in inter-war Britain meant that in one narrow sense the mobs of 1919 had succeeded in their efforts to strip black people of their status as full British citizens.

THIRTEEN

'We Prefer their Company'

There were more black people in Britain in 1944 than there were in 1948, the year the *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury and 492 West Indians landed in the imperial 'mother country'. The black population in the summer of 1944 was somewhere around a hundred and fifty thousand.¹ In 1948, there were probably fewer than twenty thousand. Britain's black population may well not have returned to its 1944 peak until around 1958, after ten years of post-war immigration from the West Indies and Africa.²

This change is accounted for by a single factor. On the eve of D-Day, in June 1944, there were a hundred and thirty thousand African American GIs, both army and air force, stationed in Britain. The wartime influx of black American soldiers was unprecedented in multiple ways. Never before had the black population been so large, yet the majority of this wartime population were neither migrants nor settlers. Nor were they black Britons or even black subjects of the British Empire, but soldiers and citizens of another state — albeit mistreated soldiers and second-class citizens. Their arrival in Britain, their interactions with the British public and the strategies and policies adopted by both the British government and the American authorities to manage those interactions revealed much about Britain and the British in the middle of the twentieth century.

Racially segregated America sent a racially segregated army to Britain in 1942. In the Southern states, that segregation was upheld through a system of organized repression, political disenfranchisement and

economic marginalization known as the Jim Crow laws, named after the blackface minstrel character that Thomas D. Rice brought to London in the 1830s. Except for the white officers commanding black Americans, the two 'races' lived as separately in Britain as they had at home. They were billeted in separate camps, often ate in separate canteens, and spent their free time in separate army clubs. Within its camps and bases, the US Army (which included the USAAF) was at liberty to replicate on British soil all the divisions, inequalities and injustices that characterized relations between black and white Americans in the middle of the twentieth century.

The question for the British authorities, who had opened up their country to their new ally, was whether American segregation and American racism would be permitted beyond their fences. Would Jim Crow style segregation be allowed in the towns and villages of Britain? Would bars, dance halls and restaurants refuse to admit black men; would railway carriages be reserved for whites only? Would racial discrimination become formalized and officially sanctioned, and, if so, would the British public comply? Furthermore, how could Britain be seen as a reasonable, rational, paternalistic colonial master, who had the best interests of her subject peoples at heart at all times, if she was also complicit in the establishment of a formal colour bar? And what of the thousands of black Britons, born and bred in the country? What of the black soldiers, airmen and workers who had left the colonies to serve the empire in its hour of need and were now resident in Britain? How would they and their families react if news of such laws in Britain reached the islands of the West Indies and the port cities of West Africa?

If they had been in a position to choose, Britain's political leaders surely would have been glad to sidestep all of these questions. Their preference would have been for the American army deployed to Britain in 1942 to be all-white. This would not have been out of step with official wartime policies towards black people from the British Empire. To accept or reject the labour of black men from the British Empire was a decision within the gift of the British government, and the demands for skilled men did force the government to recruit men and women from both the West Indies and Africa, but perhaps with the memories of 1919 influencing their decision-making, an interdepartmental consultation, held in January

1942, concluded that despite Britain's pressing wartime labour needs the 'recruitment to the United Kingdom of coloured British subjects, whose remaining in the United Kingdom after the war might create a social problem, was not considered desirable.'³

However, the racial composition of the army America sent to Britain was, of course, a matter for the Americans, and one over which the British had little influence. Not that this stopped the government from attempting to persuade the Americans to send a racially monotone force. In a War Cabinet meeting of July 1942, Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, expressed his concern that if black troops were sent, tensions would arise between the British public and white American soldiers because there was a likelihood of 'certain sections of our people showing more effusiveness to the coloured troops than the Americans would readily understand'.⁴ Desperately fumbling for further reasons as to why black troops should be excluded, Eden fell back on a familiar trope. Forgetting, perhaps, that he was discussing men from North America, rather than equatorial Africa, he wheeled out the now customary contention that the African Americans would struggle to cope with the supposedly extreme conditions of winter in southern England. Unsurprisingly, black GIs from cities like Chicago, New York and Washington DC found the rigours of the English winter entirely tolerable.

Eden's Private Secretary, Oliver Hardy, later laid out the dilemma he and Eden believed the country would face if, as was expected, around 10 per cent of the American force deployed to Britain was black. 'If we treat them naturally as equals, there will be trouble with the Southern officers. If we treat them differently, there will be trouble with the "North Americans"', by which he meant men from the Northern states.⁵ Despite polite, diplomatic protestations by the British the Americans were not swayed. For their own domestic political reasons, and in response to pressure from black American civil rights groups, they insisted that the American army dispatched to England contained African Americans. But the Allies did agree that the African American proportion of the US force would be representative of the proportion of black people in the American population as a whole, hence the figure of 10 per cent.

Anthony Eden, Winston Churchill and the British government

could no more determine the ethnic make-up of the US Army than they could control how the British public reacted to the rather sudden arrival of tens of thousands of African American soldiers. After the isolation of 1940 and 1941 the British were overjoyed to be joined on their island by their American allies. As the GIs began to land and occupy their new bases *The Times* commented, 'We feel stronger, not only physically but even more in spirit, for their presence among us.'⁶ Deployment began in May 1942, and by the autumn there were around eleven thousand black troops in the UK. Most were in the South-West of England and in the port towns of the south coast; some were in Wales, East Anglia and on Merseyside. With the exception of Bristol and Liverpool, which both had small black populations of their own and long links to the Atlantic slave trade, in most of the areas black people were almost unknown. Their inhabitants, as well as the more worldly citizens of the ports, proved extraordinarily welcoming to the African American troops. In the rural areas and market towns of a Britain that had only a tiny black population, they were an exciting novelty and rather rapidly became particularly popular among the British public.

Britain had, of course, experienced serious racial violence in 1919, and in the 1920s passed laws targeting 'coloured seamen'. Yet little over two decades later, black GIs were welcomed with open arms. But this did not mean that racial prejudice had somehow disappeared. The black Americans were not immigrating, had not come to stay and were not suspected of 'taking British jobs' or houses; rather the opposite, the influx of 1.5 million well-paid GIs, both black and white, was a great boon to Britain's battered wartime economy.

The black Americans were popular with the British public, in part, as they appear to have accepted their deployment to Britain with better grace and fewer complaints than many of their white compatriots. Many white Americans were accustomed to a number of everyday luxuries that were unknown to the British, and they grumbled endlessly about their absence. African Americans, by contrast, especially those from the rural South, had lived pre-war lives of comparative poverty. In material terms, their living standards were far closer to those of their British hosts. Having never known the 'comforts of home' that the white GIs so sorely missed, the black GIs complained less about life in Britain. They were paid the same

as their white countrymen, and many black GIs had more money in Britain than they had had as civilians. All GIs were extremely well-paid by British standards, but the black troops were seen as less flashy and overt in their consumption. They were repeatedly described by British civilians as 'self-controlled', 'reserved' and 'disciplined'. 'Everybody here adores the Negro troops, all the girls go to their dances, but nobody likes the white Americans. They swagger about us as if they were the only people fighting this war. They all get so drunk and look so untidy while the negroes are very polite, much smarter and everybody's pets',⁷ wrote a British woman from Marlborough in Wiltshire in March 1943. This politeness, of course, was a trait that generations of black men had learnt in the post-Civil War South, as such attributes were essential for survival in the regions in which black communities lived under the shadow of the Jim Crow laws.

Before the American deployment, Oliver Hardy had feared that the 'North Americans', white men from the Northern states, would take offence if the British treated the black GIs in a discriminatory manner. During the summer of 1942, it became apparent that it was the British public who most vehemently objected to the mistreatment of black GIs in Britain. Exposed for the first time to the sheer vindictiveness of American racial prejudice, it was they who took greatest offence, and they who were most repelled by the violence meted out to black GIs. In reaction to a ceaseless stream of abuses and incidents in which white Americans attacked, assaulted or abused the black GIs, there was a wave of revulsion and resentment, which developed into a great upsurge of anti-American sentiment. The reputation of the Americans was particularly tarnished within local communities who witnessed the abuse of black GIs at first hand, and despite careful attempts to control the press, reports of some incidents did appear in British newspapers. In December 1943 George Orwell noted that 'The general consensus of opinion seems to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes.'⁸ A pub in Bristol displayed a notice that read 'Only blacks served here' and when the landlady in another bar was confronted by white Americans who were angry that coloured customers were served their drinks and treated as equals, she responded, 'Their money is as good as yours, and we prefer their company.'⁹

Acts of violence against black GIs by white American soldiers

had been predicted by Hugh Dalton, the President of the Board of Trade, who in conversation with an official from the Ministry of Information in July 1942, had warned that the British public would take the side of black GIs if they were assaulted by white Americans in the street or pubs.¹⁰ In one such incident, in Cosham near Portsmouth in the summer of 1943, a group of black GIs who had gathered outside the pub were ordered to disperse by a group of white American Military Police. When an argument erupted the Military Police were surrounded by British civilians, one of whom shouted, 'Why don't you leave them alone?' One of the black GIs shouted down the Military Police, saying, 'We ain't no slaves, this is England'.¹¹ Members of Britain's small black population and the cohort of West Indian servicemen and women in the country also sided with the black GIs when the latter faced attacks or abuse from white Americans. The traditional British love of the underdog may have played a part here, as many Britons almost instinctually took the side of the oppressed minority.¹² One strategy adopted by the Americans to reduce tension was the policy of 'rotating passes', a subtler form of segregation whereby black troops would be allowed to visit the approved pubs and dance halls on one night, and whites on another.

An incident reported in *The Times* in October 1942 exposed how American racial views were seen as not only at odds with those that prevailed in Britain but as directly contrary to the stated aims of the war itself. The incident involved the manager of a snack bar in Oxford who – more in sadness than anger – wrote to *The Times*:

The other night a coloured US soldier came into our establishment and very diffidently presented me with an open letter from his commanding officer, explaining that "Pte. — is a soldier in the US Army, and it is necessary that he sometimes has a meal, which he has, on occasion, found it difficult to obtain. I would be grateful if you would look after him." Naturally we looked after him to the best of our ability, but I could not help feeling ashamed that in a country where even stray dogs are "looked after" by special societies, a citizen of the world, who is fighting the world's battle for freedom and equality, should have found it necessary to place himself in this humiliating position. Had there been the slightest

objection from other customers, I should not have any hesitation in asking them all to leave.¹³

In 1943, the American Office of War Information and the British War Office commissioned the public information film *Welcome to Britain*, which was shown to American soldiers but not the British public.¹⁴ Bizarrely, it starred the Hollywood actor Burgess Meredith (best known today for playing the role of 'the Penguin' in the 1960s *Batman* television series). Meredith played the role of the soldier everyman, who wandered around wartime England having meaningful encounters with British civilians, railway workers, American generals and, at one point, Bob Hope. He was by turns naive and lost, and worldly and knowledgeable. Repeatedly, he spoke straight to camera, offering advice on how to navigate the cultural differences between Britain and the United States. In one scene, set in an English railway station, a black GI from Birmingham, Alabama, is invited to tea by an elderly British lady. 'If you come to my Birmingham you must come to my home and have a cup of tea with me,' she says, shaking the black soldier warmly by the hand. At this point, the black GI conveniently heads off to buy cigarettes allowing Meredith to turn to camera and speak directly to his GI audience. 'Now look, men,' he begins, 'you heard that conversation. That's not unusual here, it's the sort of thing that happens quite a lot. Now let's be frank about it, there are coloured soldiers as well as white here and there are less social restrictions in this country – just what you heard an English woman asking a coloured boy to tea, she was polite about it and he was polite about it. Now that might not happen at home, but the point is we're not at home.' He continued, 'If we bring a lot of prejudices here what are we gonna do about 'em?' In a second scene Meredith and the black GI happen, as if by accident, upon Major General John C. H. Lee, Commander of the Services of Supply (SOS), the unglamorous labour and logistics corps of the US Army, to which the majority of the black GIs had been assigned. In a staged and mawkish conversation the general, whose ancestors had fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, is allowed to eulogize at length about the promise of 'real citizenship' that America had supposedly offered 'the Negro'. Disturbingly, the general promises that 'everyone is treated the same when it comes to dying.' He then pontificates about the war and the

opportunity it offers the nation to 'try to live up to our American promises'. As General Lee finally finishes his impromptu lecture, the music swells, the white GI shares a cigarette with his black comrade and the military audience is left to reflect. Laughably unsubtle and clumsy by modern standards, *Welcome to Britain* nonetheless went down extremely well with the white US troops and with the British press. The *Daily Mail* said that the film 'should do more than any other single factor to create a genuine Anglo-American understanding'.¹⁵ A number of British newspapers joined together and called for the film to be put on general release to British civilians. The military authorities politely rejected that proposal.

During the First World War, Winston Churchill, as we have seen, campaigned in support of the 'Million Black Army' movement and spoke powerfully in Parliament in favour of the recruitment of black African soldiers for deployment on the Western Front. As Prime Minister in another conflict, two decades later, he was far more reticent on the subject of race. In September 1942, by which time there were around eleven thousand black troops in Britain out of a total of a hundred and seventy thousand US personnel, the racial attitudes of many white US soldiers had already led to outbreaks of violence and public disturbances. Through the work of Mass Observation, a social research organization founded in 1937, the government was well aware that black soldiers were being attacked on the streets and driven out of pubs and dance halls. On 29 September, Labour MP Tom Driberg tackled Churchill on the issue in the House of Commons, asking if he was 'aware that an unfortunate result of the presence here of American Forces has been the introduction in some parts of Britain of discrimination against negro troops; and whether he will make friendly representations to the American military authorities asking them to instruct their men that the colour bar is not a custom of this country and that its non-observance by British troops or civilians should be regarded with equanimity?'¹⁶ Churchill responded evasively, 'The question is certainly unfortunate. I am hopeful that without any action on my part the points of view of all concerned will be mutually understood and respected.'¹⁷ The communist MP William Gallacher then rose to ask the Prime Minister

whether he was aware of 'a letter, a copy of which I have sent to him, from a number of [British] serving men informing me that an officer has given them a lecture advising them on the necessity for discrimination in connection with negroes who are in London.' Gallacher received no answer from the Prime Minister, who would not be drawn on such a sensitive issue dividing the wartime allies.

The lecture William Gallacher was referring to was probably connected to a document by Major General Arthur Dowler in August 1942. Dowler was the Senior British Administrative Officer in the Southern Command, which covered the English South-West, the region to which most of the black GIs had been deployed. In the absence of guidance from his superiors, Dowler, after consulting the Americans, had drafted a document that he entitled *Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops*. It began, 'Among the American troops in this country are a number of units whose personnel are coloured troops.' While Dowler admitted that 'they contribute a valuable service to the prosecution of the war by the provision of labour both skilled and unskilled', he warned that 'their presence in England presents a new problem to British men and women brought in contact with them . . . The racial problem is there and cannot be ignored. It is necessary, therefore, for the British, both men and women, to realize the problem and to adjust their attitude so that it conforms to that of the white American citizen.' Dowler's assessment of the character of the African American GI was influenced by his conversations with the American authorities, but it could just as easily have been assembled from the various caricatures and stereotypes that had been burnt onto the British psyche by a century of reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and listening to minstrel songs. Dowler wrote that 'While there are many coloured men of high mentality and cultural distinction, the generality are of a simple mental outlook. They work hard when they have no money and when they have money prefer to do nothing until it is gone. In short they have not the white man's ability to think and act to a plan. Their spiritual outlook is well known and their songs give a clue to their nature.'¹⁸ The British public had to be especially careful, said the general, because black men 'are natural psychologists in that they can size up the white man's character and can take advantage of a weakness. Too much freedom, too wide associations with white men tend to make them lose their heads and have on occasions led

to civil strife.¹⁹ He concluded that it was critical that 'white women should not associate with coloured men. It follows then that they should not walk out, dance, or drink with them. Do not think such action hard or unsociable. They do not expect your companionship and such relations would in the end only result in strife.'²⁰

Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops was drafted without permission from the War Office or the War Cabinet and raised enormous concerns within the Colonial Office, where officials were attempting to soothe racial tensions within the empire and advocate a policy of broad racial equality. In a memorandum written in early October, the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Viscount Cranbourne, warned of the dangers to Britain's reputation among the black people of the empire if the government was seen to be going along with the Americans in the establishment of formal segregation in Britain. The Ministry of War, however, was broadly in favour of supporting the American policies of racial segregation and the Secretary of State for War, Sir James Grigg, prepared an official paper in which he described the nation as being 'on a razor's edge', caught between the racial attitudes of its American allies and the British public's revulsion at segregation and the violence that it led to. Grigg argued that in order to control the situation it was imperative that British soldiers be supplied with 'the facts and history of the colour question' in the US Army.

On 13 October 1942, the War Cabinet met to discuss the treatment and segregation of black GIs in Britain, and determine whether British service personnel were to be educated in American racial attitudes as in *Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops*. Viscount Cranbourne, nervous as to how British policies would look to black people in the colonies, argued as Sir James Grigg had that British soldiers should be made aware of the racial issues that existed in the United States, to allow them to understand why white Americans were so fervently opposed to interaction between the races. After a fractious meeting, it decided that Britain would not oppose the American army's policy of segregation but would not permit British authorities, military or civilian, to play a part in enforcing it. However, it also concluded that 'it was desirable that the people of this country should avoid becoming too friendly with coloured American troops',²¹ but there were to be no formal instructions on how to treat black American GIs.

The Cabinet also discussed the disruption that racial segregation had caused in the UK. One American general had observed that 'the Negro British nationals are rightly incensed. They undoubtedly have been cursed; made to get off the sidewalk, leave eating places and separated from their white wives by American soldiers.'²² While Churchill could be circumspect on his views on race in Parliament, he was often flippant in private. When Viscount Cranbourne told him of a black Colonial Office official who had been barred from eating at his usual lunchtime restaurant because it had become a favourite with white American officers, Churchill quipped, 'That's all right. if he takes his banjo with him they'll think he's one of the band.'²³

Churchill was by no means alone among politicians of the age in his propensity to fall back upon racial stereotypes. In the 1920s, David Lloyd George – who once insisted that Britain 'reserve the right to bomb the niggers' – suggested that Churchill's personality might be a result of racial mixing among his ancestors. With no evidence to substantiate his claims, Lloyd George privately expressed the view that the half-American Churchill 'undoubtedly had nigger blood in him. Look at his build and slouch. The Marlboroughs [Churchill's family] were a poor type physically, but Winston was strong. Another characteristic of Winston is that when he gets excited he shrieks: again the nigger comes out.'²⁴

As a result of the Cabinet meeting, a guidance memo, *Instructions as to the advice which should be given to British service personnel*, was completed and approved by both the Cabinet and the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, General Eisenhower, a few months later. Although far less frank than Dowler's *Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops* 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'. The instructions 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. It may also be misunderstood by the Negro troops themselves'. It continued, 'This does not mean that friendly hospitality in the home or in social gatherings need be ruled out, though in such cases care should be taken not to invite white and coloured troops at the same time.'²⁵

The warmth with which the British public embraced the black GIs was profoundly difficult for many white GIs from the Southern states to accept. Information films like *Welcome to Britain* partially persuaded them that the warmth of the British and the lack of racial segregation in pubs and cafes could be attributed to a quirk of cultural difference. However, when it came to inter-race relations, the gulf between the views of the Americans and their British hosts was so wide that at times it threatened to seriously damage inter-Allied relations.

Many white GIs refused to tolerate inter-racial relations point blank. For them, relationships between black GIs and British women were morally intolerable, and contacts between black GIs and British white women, however platonic, were liable to elicit violent reactions. One lieutenant wrote home that 'one thing I noticed here which I don't like is the fact that the English don't draw any color line . . . the English must be pretty ignorant. I can't see how a white girl could associate with a negro.'²⁶ Another white GI revealed how he and others reacted: 'Every time so far that we have seen a nigger with a white girl we have run him away. I would like to shoot the whole bunch of them.'²⁷

There was some British sympathy with the American position on inter-racial relationships. Both the *Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops* and the *Instructions as to the advice which should be given to British service personnel* had taken great pains to emphasize how sensitive the Americans were on this issue, and offered historical background to contextualize and, to some extent, excuse American racism. Some Britons recoiled at the sight of mixed-race couples. In October 1942 the novelist Ann Meader was horrified to see two black soldiers with two blonde white girls in Weston-super-Mare, where large numbers of GIs were stationed. Meader confessed to her diary that she felt the British girls should be 'shot' for taking the risk of introducing 'coloured blood' into their children.²⁸ The Conservative MP Maurice Petherick wrote, disgruntledly, to Anthony Eden at the Foreign Office in December 1943, appalled that a number of black GIs had been stationed in his Falmouth constituency. Deploying a racial term rarely used in England since the seventeenth century, he complained that in Falmouth 'as in other parts of England women of the lowest order are consorting with the blackamoors . . . There is very strong feeling

about this', he warned Eden, before suggesting that the Foreign Secretary should ask the Americans 'to send those we have to North Africa, where the poor devils, they would be much more happy and warm.'²⁹ He also recommended that the black GIs be transferred to the Italian front where they would be free to 'go and fertilize the Italians who are used to it anyhow'.³⁰

The same year, Maurice Dale Colbourne, an official of the British Information Service in New York, published *America and Britain: a Mutual Introduction*. Having travelled extensively within the United States, Colbourne recognized that white American and British views on inter-racial relationships overlapped far more than their views on segregation. He complained of 'Britons with no colour problem, and imagining themselves free from colour prejudice,' who 'easily slip into violent denunciations of the American colour bar as a disgrace to and denial of democracy . . . Whenever I encounter a Briton waxing eloquent along that line,' Colbourne continued, 'I ask him, preferably in front of others: "Would you like your sister to marry a Negro?"'³¹ It was on this point, he suggested, that the Allies could unite. Later, the Army Military History Institute in Pennsylvania surveyed soldiers who had served in the Second World War, drafting a series of questionnaires. When asked, 'Did you note any instances of ethnic, racial or religious discrimination? Please explain . . .?', Sergeant Theodore G. Aufort, from southern California, answered 'yes', recalling the tensions among the white GIs as a conflict of 'North against the South'. Aufort explained, 'The southern boys were always using the argument, "would you want your sister to marry one".'³²

The British authorities were well aware of the potential for inter-racial relationships to inflame anger among white American soldiers, and of the propensity for that anger to spill over into violence. Throughout the summer of 1942 and into 1943, white GIs kept up a sustained campaign of violence against black GIs who met or dated white British women. In Bristol, a city in which a large number of black GIs were stationed, one well-to-do resident reported that 'every open space . . . is full of black Americans with their white girls.'³³ Black GIs in the city had become so accustomed to being attacked by their white countrymen that they had even taken to stationing lookouts. In December 1942 there was a series

of fights and stabbings in the Old Market area of the city, which began when a group of white Southerners decided to stamp out relationships between black GIs and local women.

A journalist from the *New Statesman and Nation* spoke to a number of the white GIs and painted a horrific picture of their attitudes and behaviours. He reported meeting white Southerners 'who seemed rational enough until the Negro problem was mentioned, and who would then show a terrifying lynching spirit, which was about the ugliest thing imaginable.'³⁴ He concluded that at the heart of the problem was the fact that white GIs from the 'deep south . . . take it for granted that it is their duty to interfere if they see black troops with white girls.' He suggested that the American authorities were duty-bound to 'use every device of persuasion to let white southern troops know that it is against discipline to treat Negro soldiers in a way to which their training and education has accustomed them'. Such a process of 'discipline and education' could not of course be put in place overnight but, 'If things are left to drift very unhappy incidents' were bound to occur, he warned.³⁵ In one of these unhappy incidents a white GI from the South who had been invited into an English home for the evening was enraged to discover that his fellow guest was an African American soldier, whom he proceeded to physically attack in front of his horrified hosts. General Eisenhower had some sympathy with the actions of his white troops and suspected that some English girls did not understand the gravity of their relationships with black troops. In a letter to Washington in September 1942, he wrote:

To most English people, including the village girls – even those of perfectly fine character – the negro soldier is just another man, rather fascinating because he is unique in their experience, a jolly good fellow and with money to spend. Our own white soldiers, seeing a girl walk down the street with a negro, frequently see themselves as protectors of the weaker sex and believe it necessary to intervene to the extent of using force, to let her know what she's doing.³⁶

That month, tensions over relationships between black GIs and British women were exposed in the British press through the actions of an unlikely figure. Mrs May, the wife of the vicar in the village

of Worle, near Weston-super-Mare, took it upon herself to draw up a six-point code designed to limit contact between white women and black soldiers.

1. If a local woman keeps a shop and a coloured soldier enters, she must serve him, but she must do it as quickly as possible and indicate as quickly that she does not desire him to come there again.
2. If she is in a cinema and notices a coloured soldier next to her, she moves to another seat immediately.
3. If she is walking on the pavement and a coloured soldier is coming towards her, she crosses to the other pavement.
4. If she is in a shop and a coloured soldier enters, she leaves as soon as she has made her purchase or before that if she is in a queue.
5. White women, of course, must have no social relationship with coloured troops.
6. On no account must coloured troops be invited to the homes of white women.

Mrs May then held a series of public meetings at which copies of her new code were distributed, and she addressed the ladies of Worle, alerting them to their new responsibilities. The result was a scandal in the national press as the women of Worle turned, not against the black GIs, but against Mrs May. One local woman told the *Sunday Pictorial*, 'I was disgusted, and so were most of the women there. We have no intention of agreeing to her decree.'³⁷ Another commented, 'If the woman is talking like this in the name of the Church I should be interested to know what her husband's bishop thinks of it.'³⁸ In a quite remarkable editorial comment, which appeared under the headline 'Vicar's Wife Insults Our Allies', the *Sunday Pictorial* attempted to offer comfort to the arriving black GI by assuring him 'that there is no colour bar in this country and that he is as welcome as any other allied soldier. He will find the vast majority of people here have nothing but repugnance for the narrow-minded, uninformed prejudices expressed by the vicar's wife. There is – and will be – no persecution of coloured people in Britain.'³⁹

They were fine words, but black Britons who could recall 1919, or who had experienced the colour bar and the prejudice of the inter-war years, knew that they offered a highly idealized view of Britain and British race relations. Yet the attempts – both official and impromptu – by the Americans to enforce racial segregation, and the unabashed and overt prejudice that the US Army brought with it to Britain, allowed the press and public to adopt a position of moral superiority on the issue of race, as their ancestors had done over the issue of slavery in the 1840s and 1850s. Racial prejudice was considered an American vice that the more civilized and culturally sophisticated British rejected.

The British authorities were particularly active in the matter of inter-racial relationships. As well as issuing the *Instructions as to the advice which should be given to British service personnel*, they took part in direct attempts to limit contact between British women and black GIs, and in this way became complicit in American-led efforts to enforce segregation. In some cases the law and the police were used to target British women known to be associating with black American troops. In the summer of 1943, police in Derbyshire used the wartime Defence Regulations to launch prosecutions aimed at stopping 'The association of U.S.A. coloured troops with British women', while in Melton Mowbray five women were prosecuted 'for trespassing on premises in the occupation of coloured troops'.⁴⁰ Another group of women were charged by the magistrates in Newton Abbot, in 1944, for violating the security of a nearby military area. All five were married and were said to have been caught attempting to visit their black boyfriends. The local newspaper decided to name and shame them, going as far as to inform readers that the husband of one woman was 'serving abroad' and that she had two children, aged four and seven.⁴¹ The heavy-handed and moralistic approach taken by the police, magistrates and the press in these cases was indicative of a wider concern about wartime extramarital activity. Many of the women who became the sweethearts of both black and white GIs were married. The enormous levels of social dislocation caused by the war, almost unimaginable to generations who did not live through the conflict, enormously disrupted normal patterns of familial relationships. The affairs and flirtations between white British women and black American GIs was, in one sense, merely a highly visible

and more morally dubious manifestation of these deeper social ruptures.

A series of changes in US Army deployment and police tactics began to bring the situation under control. In 1943, when there was a second influx of black GIs, the army came to terms with the fact that the cause of the violence was racist white soldiers. A discipline regime was introduced, as were Military Police patrols that included both black and white officers. However what ended the crisis was D-Day, and the transfer of the vast majority of the black GIs to the Continent.

The debate about black GIs and their relationships with white women, though, continued long after the war. In the years after 1945, thousands of British women who had or would become engaged or married to white GIs, or had children with them out of wedlock, went to the United States under the GI bride scheme, but the white sweethearts of black GIs had the significant obstacle that inter-racial marriage was banned in around twenty states.

In 1947, a woman from the Midlands named Margaret Goosey travelled to Virginia, and there married her black GI sweetheart Thomas Johnson, in contravention of Virginia law. The groom was arrested and sent to the state industrial farm; the bride was jailed for six months and deported. The case was reported in the British press and raised in Parliament by Tom Driberg, the MP who had confronted Churchill on the abuse of black GIs in 1942. Driberg asked Ernest Bevin, then Foreign Secretary, if he would agree that it did not matter how 'undesirable a particular marriage may seem to be to many people, or to the local legislator', it is 'an elementary human right that men and women should be allowed to get married, irrespective of race or creed'.⁴² Bevin, however, could 'see no ground for action' as the 'case was in accordance with Virginia State Law' and because 'Miss Goosey was warned by the State Authorities beforehand'.⁴³ Driberg asked that 'this very difficult subject' be referred to the Working Group on the Convention on Human Rights.⁴⁴

Hanging over all the debates and official protestations around the issue of inter-racial relations during the years of American deployment was a deep-seated but often unspoken concern about mixed-race children, or 'brown babies', as they were often called at the time. In November 1942, the Home Secretary, Herbert

Morrison, wrote that he was 'fully conscious that a difficult sex problem might be created if there were a substantial number of cases of sex relations between white women and coloured troops and the procreation of half-caste children.'⁴⁵ Unlike many of his colleagues, Morrison did not believe the solution lay in some form of public education, which in his opinion would be unlikely 'to have any influence on the class of women who are attracted by coloured men'.⁴⁶ *The Colour Problem As The American Sees It*, an Army Bureau of Current Affairs educational pamphlet that was distributed in December 1942, suggested that the problem of mixed-race children was not just an American concern but a British one too. Produced for British service personnel, it was intended as a document that would open up group discussions. In strikingly Darwinian language, the pamphlet stated that while 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 is 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'.⁴⁷

In October 1943, Churchill was informed by the Duke of Marlborough, the Military Liaison Officer to US forces, that ten brown babies had already been born and that it was 'quite conceivable that there are many others which are on the way'.⁴⁸ When Eleanor Roosevelt asked her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, about the matter, he said, 'I think this is a British problem—not American'.⁴⁹

By the end of the war, twenty-two thousand children had been born to British mothers and white American soldiers. The number of 'brown babies' was not known but became the subject of feverish speculation, with estimates ranging from a plausible five hundred and fifty to a ludicrously exaggerated twenty thousand. The most reliable estimates were carried out by the black British civil rights organization The League of Coloured Peoples, which was founded by Dr Harold Moody in 1931. Their 1946 estimate was five hundred and fifty-three. By 1948 that figure had grown to seven hundred and seventy-five.

The warmth and hospitality that had characterized the war years evaporated. Many children were abandoned by their mothers, who had themselves been ostracized by their communities and even

families. Most were sent to children's homes, from which very few were successfully placed for adoption. Schemes for their adoption by black families in the United States were considered but never put into action as innumerable legal hurdles stood in the way. Furthermore Britain's politicians worried about how it looked to the non-white peoples of the colonies if Britain demonstrated herself incapable or unwilling to care for and educate a mere few hundred mixed-race children, and saw the only solution to be their mass deportation. There was more strident and ugly opposition from within the United States. Mississippi Congressman John E. Rankin, who was infamous for using the word 'nigger' in debates in the House of Representatives, expressed, in the House, his rabid opposition 'to bringing to this country a lot of illegitimate half-breed Negro children from England' whose mothers, he said, were 'the scum of the British Isles'.⁵⁰

Black GIs were not the only newcomers to Britain during the war. Although Churchill had flippantly dismissed concerns about discrimination against the black colonial officials, there were those in Whitehall who feared that the abuse of black Britons and black subjects of the British by white Americans would threaten morale in the colonies and among the black servicemen and women in Britain. By 1942, there was a large number of black colonial servicemen and women, whose rights and morale were an issue of material importance to the war effort. At the start of the war the government had yielded to pressure from black organizations and the colonies and announced that black men who were 'not of pure European descent' would be permitted to serve in the British armed forces, overthrowing the policy of the First World War. Black men were also to be allowed to put themselves forward for commissions and be judged on an allegedly equal basis alongside white candidates, although this policy was only to last for the duration of 'the present emergency'.⁵¹ However, the War Office and Colonial Office, using almost the same words as they had done during the First World War, once again concluded that black men from the West Indies 'would be of doubtful military value for combat service overseas, especially against German troops in Europe'.⁵²

The fall of France in the early spring of 1940 left Britain alone against the might of the Nazi war machine and cleared the mind of British politicians, who were inspired to take a more pragmatic approach to the deployment of colonial manpower and expertise. Policies were relaxed and men from the West Indies arrived in Britain to carry out essential war work. Six hundred foresters were sent to Scotland from British Honduras, as were three hundred and fifty engineers and electricians to Liverpool. More men followed. Unlike in the First World War, black colonial subjects were deployed in skilled combat roles in the European theatre of operations, and not merely as labourers. More than twelve thousand West Indians served in the British forces during the war, many of them highly skilled specialists. Some were trained and served with the Royal Canadian Air Force, and were deployed to Britain as part of that contingent. Over a hundred men from the West Indies who served with the RAF and Royal Canadian Air Force were decorated during the conflict. Women from the West Indies also served, eighty in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and thirty in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (the ATS). These black men and women, who were based in Britain and wore uniforms, reported very little racism from white Britons, although a 1945 edition of the patriotically British magazine *John Bull* noted in an editorial that 'Rudeness to colonial service girls in this country is surprisingly common . . . a West Indian girl in the ATS was refused a new issue of shoes by her officer who added: "at home you don't wear shoes anyway"'. The editorial lamented that 'Colonial troops came to this country to help us win the war. But they are bitter because the colour bar still exists in Britain.'⁵³

In the majority of racist incidents in which black service personnel were assaulted or insulted, the perpetrators were white American GIs. Such incidents began to occur within weeks of the Americans' arrival. In August 1942, a West Indian musician playing in a band during a dance in an English village hall attracted no hostility from a group of white Southern American soldiers so long as he remained on stage – white Americans being accustomed to being entertained by black musicians. However, as a newspaper report revealed, the moment he 'took to the floor with the wife of one of his [white] colleagues in the band, one of the southern American boys probably went across the room and struck him.'⁵⁴

On 23 June 1943, Sergeant Arthur Walrond, an RAFVR wireless operator and gunner from Barbados, was attacked by two white GIs at a dance after asking a white woman to dance. Walrond, who was a journalist by profession, complained to the Colonial Office, stating, 'I came to this country from the British West Indies as a volunteer for Air Crew Duties under the protection of the British Government, and I demand as far as humanly possible that I get that protection and its corresponding consideration.' With striking eloquence, he demanded that the perpetrators of the attack be punished and asked 'that action be taken to ensure the non-recurrence of such an affair as this either with myself or other coloured people in this country . . . I have never been trained to think in terms of nations or races and I had hoped that four years of war would at least have taught the world this lesson. But the long standing underlying prejudice for coloured people despite their value, ability or achievement still remains to rear its ugly head, and leaves the most distasteful gap to be bridged. To say time will remove these ills is not good enough'.⁵⁵ That day, Walrond's Stirling bomber was shot down in a mission over Cologne and he was killed.⁵⁶

Black civilians from the colonies were also affected by the imported racism of the white GIs. In the summer of 1944, the West Indian cricketer Learie Constantine booked a room at the Imperial Hotel in Russell Square. Before arriving Constantine took the precaution – thankfully unimaginable today – of asking the hotel if his race would pose any impediment to him staying, and was assured that there would be no problems on that account. When Constantine and his family arrived, on the evening of 30 July, they were informed by the manageress, Margaret O'Sullivan, that they could stay for one night, not the four that he had booked. During the ensuing argument O'Sullivan was heard to say 'he is a nigger . . . We won't have niggers in this hotel.'⁵⁷ This, it later transpired, was because also staying in the hotel were a number of white American soldiers, who O'Sullivan believed would object to the presence of a black family. O'Sullivan later claimed that she feared there would be a quarrel between Constantine – who was travelling with his wife and daughter – and the Americans. When the case of *Constantine v. Imperial Hotels Ltd* came to court in 1944 one witness explained that Constantine had reminded the management that 'he was a British

subject, and that he saw no reason why Americans, who were aliens, should have any preference at the hotel over a British subject.⁷⁵⁸ Questions about the incident were asked in Parliament and in June 1944, Constantine took the case to the High Court. As racial discrimination was not legally prohibited in Britain at the time, the case rested on contract law. The judge found in Constantine's favour and awarded damages. The case was widely publicized and in certain circles was regarded as a national embarrassment.

The vast majority of the black men and women who served in the British forces during the Second World War did not experience racism of the sort experienced by Learie Constantine. While the number of black people in Britain grew in relative terms, in keeping with the racial policies of the First World War, most of the black people who served in the Second never even set foot in Britain and were deployed either in Africa or in other colonial regions. There were three hundred and seventy-two thousand Africans. The Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) recruited in Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, their soldiers fighting in the Abyssinian campaign against the Italians between 1940 and 1941, and in Burma against the Japanese. The King's African Rifles (KAR) comprised men from Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Somaliland and Nyasaland (now Malawi); it took part in the defeat of the Italians in Abyssinia and the capture of the Vichy French colony of Madagascar. Africans too fought against the Japanese in the Burma campaign, which was the first time the KAR and RWAFF had been permitted to fight outside their home continent. Significantly, their opponent was a non-white enemy. The deployment was regarded as a phenomenal success and several of the African troops were decorated, including one who received the British Empire Medal. All of the customary pseudoscientific-racial theories were put forward to explain the Africans' prowess at jungle combat; they were said to be miraculously immune to the diseases of the south-east Asian jungles and somehow naturally adept at fighting in dense tropical undergrowth. Among those who served in the KAR was Hussein Onyango Obama, the grandfather of the 44th President of United States, who was deployed in both Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Burma.

FOURTEEN

'Swamped'

In 1942, when black American GIs were being assaulted in British pubs and dance halls, the Colonial Secretary, Viscount Cranbourne, argued that if British military personnel were to be given information to help them appreciate American views on race then American troops should be given similar information to help them understand that the British people did not share their views. But how enlightened were British racial attitudes by the end of the Second World War? Exposure to the full virulence of American racism had powerfully demonstrated that British sentiments were profoundly different from those that prevailed in the American South, but the war had also shown that on the issue of racial mixing, some Britons were less enlightened. The abandonment of many of the mixed-race children fathered by black GIs illustrated the strength of the social stigma surrounding it. That said, it is hard to imagine post-war Britain passing anti-miscegenation laws similar to those that prohibited inter-racial marriage in Virginia at the time. What is certain is that British attitudes were changed by the war, not just from the experience of living alongside the black GIs and fighting alongside airmen and soldiers from the black colonies, but through what had been learnt during the conflict about Nazi racial policies.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Second World War was that it made racism less acceptable, not everywhere and not instantly, but in ways that in the long term proved hugely significant. The biological, Social Darwinian racism that had emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, out of which the Nazis' racial

theories had arisen, was widely repudiated after 1945, as was the view that race was an appropriate or even meaningful concept around which societies could be organized. The view that race was the 'key to history', as the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had claimed in the 1850s, lay in tatters. Not only was Social Darwinian racism discredited, so too were the racial pseudo-sciences of eugenics and 'racial-hygiene' that had later emerged. In the post-war years people began to talk of the 'myth of race', and the idea that any of the world's ethnic groups were 'racially pure', a concept that had been absolutely central to the Nazi world-view, was dismissed as a fantasy. The inescapable reality that racism had led to Auschwitz permeated the national consciousness.

Throughout the war, the newsreels and the newspapers had constantly reminded soldiers and civilians alike that a war against Nazi racism was a conflict for freedom, equality and a more inclusive view of humanity. However, the intellectual demolition of race could not undo centuries of racial thinking. Millions of people had become habituated to the idea of race, and instinctively viewed the world in racial terms. This, after all, was how they had been taught to make sense of the world, explain the rise of the European empires and rationalize their injustices. The idea of race, and the practice of racism, had emerged over centuries. It was deeply rooted and to some extent and in some quarters impervious to factual rebuttal. As the dark skin of Africans had for many generations been accepted as a marker of their supposed inferiority, the revelation that there was no scientific basis for this could not be easily assimilated into everyday thinking. For many in Britain the ideologies of imperialism and racial supremacy, along with the visual landscape of racist cartoons, *Boy's Own* adventure stories, gollywogs, 'Little Black Sambo' and a now misremembered cultural echo of Uncle Tom, remained far more potent than reports from the frontiers of the human sciences.

In 1945, soon after the Labour Party's landslide victory in the general election, the British Pan-Africanist leader George Padmore attempted to build on post-war antipathy to racism by writing an open letter to Clement Attlee. Padmore was part of the burgeoning

independence movement that was spreading across Africa and the West Indies. His *Open Letter to the Prime Minister* included a forthright condemnation of imperialism but also contained a call for racial discrimination in Britain to be outlawed and made a 'punishable offence'. Attlee did not respond to Padmore, nor did his government address the problem of discrimination or seek to end the colour bar that since at least 1919 had kept black people out of certain British trades and workplaces. The far more pressing issue for the new government was Britain's acute labour shortage, which Attlee and his Cabinet colleagues were determined would be solved using white foreign workers and not black subjects of the British Empire.

In June 1946 the British Cabinet Manpower Working Party determined that in order to meet her post-war target, Britain would need 940,000 additional workers. By the end of the year they had raised their estimate to 1,346,000.¹ To help fill this enormous shortfall, over 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', mostly Ukrainians, Latvians and Poles, who were being housed in miserable camps in Germany and Austria, were also recruited under the European Voluntary Workers scheme (EVW). Throughout the immediate post-war decades the British labour force was further expanded through an influx of Irish immigrants.² However, 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.³ One glaring problem with this strategy was that the newsagents of the islands stocked copies of British newspapers like the *South London Daily Press*, and West Indians were able to see for themselves the pages of classified advertisements for positions in British firms. Incredulous local governors and journalists were informed that these were not real openings but 'paper vacancies'. That June, an official from the Ministry of Labour rightly 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.⁴ Yet the Ministry of Labour remained stridently opposed to recruitment in the West Indies.

In 1947 the Ministry embarked upon an evaluation exercise that was ostensibly designed to determine the potential of what officials described as 'surplus male West Indians'. The findings were predictably negative. The report suggested – yet again – that black West Indians would be 'unsuitable for outdoor work in winter owing to their susceptibility to colds and more serious chest and lung ailments'.⁵ However, it simultaneously concluded that West Indians, despite being accustomed to the tropics, would be unable to work in British coal mines as they would find the conditions underground 'too hot'. In the view of the Ministry of Labour the temperature range within which black people were capable of working was extraordinarily narrow, despite the fact that in 1940 Britain had dispatched six hundred men from tropical British Honduras to work as foresters in the frozen north of Scotland, and that thousands of West Indian airmen had successfully endured sub-zero nights in unpressurized RAF bombers on missions over Germany.

That same year, a hundred and ten Jamaican workers arrived, unexpectedly, in Britain on the former troopship the *Ormonde*, having ignored the Colonial Office's untruths about 'paper vacancies'. Among their number were ten stowaways. Rather than being welcomed to labour-starved post-war Britain, as thousands of European Voluntary Workers had been, the Jamaicans were categorized as a problem. The next year, British governors in the West Indies warned London that thousands more West Indians were applying for passports. The new Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones, did his best to inform his colleagues that 'West Indians are well aware of the labour shortage in Great Britain, and it is known to them that it is proposed to employ thousands of [European] Displaced Persons . . . In these circumstances there has been a natural and immediate demand for the employment of British West Indians, who are British subjects and many of whom have had experience of work in Britain during the war years, to relieve the labour shortage in Britain'.⁶ The demand among West Indians for the chance of employment in Britain was made more acute by the fact that when the thousands of men who fought for Britain during

the war returned home, they found that their homelands' economies had been devastated. In Jamaica a hurricane in 1944 had caused devastating floods. The destruction had been especially severe in St Thomas parish, which in the 1940s, as it had been in the 1840s, was the island's poorest. It was also the parish in which the Morant Bay Rebellion had broken out and from which a high proportion of the post-war migrants to Britain were to come. The labour shortage in Britain and the economic crisis in the West Indies were the pull and push factors that inspired a wave of West Indian migration that the British government proved unable to prevent, though not for want of trying.

On 22 June 1948 the *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury docks and four hundred and ninety-two men from the West Indies came ashore. A report of their arrival in the imperial 'mother country', in the *London Evening Standard*, carried the headline 'WELCOME HOME'.⁷ As the Trinidadian calypso singer Lord Kitchener (real name Aldwyn Roberts) disembarked he was met by a film crew from Pathé News, who asked him to perform his newly composed song, 'London is the Place to Be'. The arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is widely and rightly understood as a great watershed in the black history of Britain and the year she arrived has come to be seen as the symbolic beginning of the modern phase in the relationship between Britain and the West Indies. 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 was heavily criticized for having allowed her to set sail. He stood accused of failing to have 'kept a lid on things' and permitting this 'invasion' of Britain by West Indians.⁸ The Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, was quick to stress that the West Indians had not been officially 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'.⁹ There had even been attempts to prevent the *Windrush* from leaving Jamaica; Attlee, the Prime Minister, had made enquiries as to whether she

might be diverted to East Africa, and the West Indian migrants offered work on groundnut farming projects there.¹⁰ When it became clear that the government was unable to prevent the *Empire Windrush* from docking, or to prevent the migrants from coming ashore – given that they were British subjects carrying British passports – they changed their strategy. The *Windrush* migrants were to be dispersed across the country and while this was being arranged they were warehoused in an old deep-level air-raid shelter near Clapham South underground station, which was reopened to accommodate them. While the government certainly did not welcome their arrival, British industry evidently did. Within a month the government had found work for all but twelve. The rest were hard at work in undermanned and essential industries across the country, from Scotland to Gloucester.¹¹

Around half of the migrants on the *Empire Windrush* had been in Britain during the war, serving in the RAF or the army or working in munitions factories, and might therefore be better thought of as being returnees than immigrants. Three days after their arrival the Labour MP Tom Driberg, who had challenged Winston Churchill over the abuse of black GIs in 1942, warned the men from the islands that Britain was 'not a paradise. There may be difficulties', he told them, 'caused through ignorance and prejudice, but don't let it get you down. Try and stand on your own as soon as you can.'¹² That Saturday around forty thousand spectators packed into Villa Park in Birmingham to watch the middleweight boxer Dick Turpin defeat Vince Hawkins and become Britain's first black boxing champion. Turpin was the mixed-race product of an earlier wave of West Indian migration. His father, Lionel Fitzherbert Turpin, from British Guiana (now Guyana), had travelled to Britain in 1914 and joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, which ironically was the regiment in which Enoch Powell enlisted during the Second World War. Having side-stepped the First World War colour bar, Turpin served on the Western Front. After being gassed on the Somme he returned to Britain, married a British woman, and raised his mixed-race children.

On the day the *Empire Windrush* reached Tilbury, eleven Labour MPs sent a letter to Attlee requesting that he put in place controls to limit black immigration to Britain. They wrote:

The British people fortunately enjoy a profound unity without uniformity in their way of life, and are blessed by the absence of a colour racial problem. An influx of coloured people domiciled here is likely to impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our people and social life and cause discord and unhappiness among all concerned.

In our opinion colonial governments are responsible for the welfare of their peoples and Britain is giving these governments great financial assistance to enable them to solve their population problems. We venture to suggest that the British government should, like foreign countries, the dominions and even some of the colonies, by legislation if necessary, control immigration in the political, social, economic and fiscal interests of our people.¹³

These suggestions were profoundly at odds with a bill that was at that moment was making its way through Parliament. During the summer of 1948, as the *Empire Windrush* was crossing the Atlantic, the British Nationality Act was in the latter stages of becoming law. It received Royal Assent on 31 July, five weeks after the West Indians landed at Tilbury. The act, which was in part a response to Canada's introduction of Canadian citizenship, gave the people of the empire who had formerly held the status of British Subject the new status of Commonwealth Citizen. This gave them the right to enter and settle in Britain, which was seen as the necessary continuation of a long British tradition of open borders, which was deemed fitting for a nation at the centre of a vast (if rapidly collapsing) empire. By modern standards, post-war Britain's immigration laws and her reaffirmation of citizenship rights to hundreds of millions of her colonial subjects were incredibly liberal.

Yet MPs of all parties imagined the act would simply enable the continued flow of two-way traffic between Britain and the 'old dominions' – Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand – which were sometimes called the 'white dominions' or the 'old commonwealth'. The act was intended to ensure that British people remained free to settle in the colonies and commonwealth citizens were free to reside in Britain. The people the government envisaged making use of the rights of entry and residence enshrined in the 1948 Act were white people of 'British stock', to use the common

phrase of the time, who were coming 'home' to Britain. Their rights of entry and residence in Britain were regarded as exceptionally valuable bonds that held the empire together, and were essential if Britain was to maintain her position as the lode star around which the colonies orbited. Furthermore the traffic between Britain and the old dominions flowed both ways. Most of the seven hundred and twenty thousand Britons who left their war-ravaged homeland between 1946 and 1950 headed for new lives in the old dominions. Australia was the most popular post-war destination for Britons weary of austerity and frustrated by continued rationing.¹⁴ Like many political decisions made in the immediate post-war years the underlying objective was to ensure Britain remained a significant world power, but the emotional appeal of the idea of the old dominions and their deep historical bonds to the 'mother country' was immensely powerful in the 1940s and 1950s.

However, as all commonwealth subjects were theoretically equal, the same rights of entry and residence applied to the non-white peoples of what was called the 'new commonwealth', which included Africa and the West Indies, as well as Asia. Few politicians believed that large numbers of non-white people from the 'new commonwealth' would make use of their new rights to reside in Britain, yet that is exactly what they did. Quite unintentionally, the post-war government 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. As the bill was debated, men across the West Indies, who had fought for Britain during the war, applied for the British passports to which they were entitled and which, after 1 January 1949, when the Nationality Act came into force, guaranteed them right of entry and residence in Britain.

In August 1948, while the West Indians from the *Empire Windrush* were settling into their new jobs and lodgings, *The Times* reported on disturbances that had broken out in Liverpool. As the next chapter in the black history of Britain was beginning, Liverpool was reliving the nightmare of 1919. What *The Times* reported as 'Liverpool Racial Disturbances' were in fact organized attacks on the homes and clubs

of black people.¹⁵ As in 1919, the unions were involved, this time the National Union of Seamen, which had been working hard to prevent black sailors finding employment on British ships. At the union's 1948 annual conference one of the themes for discussion was 'the colour question'.¹⁶ The Assistant General Secretary was happy to boast from the podium that 'In quite a few instances we have been successful in changing ships from coloured to white, and in many instances in persuading masters and engineers that white men should be carried in preference to coloured'.¹⁷ On other occasions 'committees had been set up in the main ports to vet all "coloured" entrants to the country who claimed to be seamen'.¹⁸ When the violence began in 1948, the hostels in which black sailors lived were once again targeted. When, on the second day of the disturbances, a mob two thousand strong attacked one hostel, the police responded exactly as they had done thirty years earlier during the disturbances in Great George Square that led to the death of Charles Wootton: they raided the hostel and arrested the black men trapped inside. What followed in Liverpool was intergenerational distrust of the police by the black community that lingered on into the 1980s.

Between 1945 and 1950 only five thousand migrants from the West Indies arrived in Britain but two unexpected events in the early 1950s contributed to this number increasing significantly. In 1951, Jamaica was struck by Hurricane Charlie, the most ferocious storm to hit the island since 1903. On 16 August, the day before it struck, forecasters predicted Charlie would miss Jamaica, but at 8.30 pm, with winds reaching 130 mph, it shifted course and headed straight for the south-eastern shore. It made landfall at Morant Bay, crashing into that poor blighted town. So strong were the winds that an avenue of palm trees that had been planted along the shoreline were ripped out of the ground. Not even their stumps remained. To the west of Morant Bay, around Kingston, thousands of houses were destroyed and ships from the harbour were flung onto the shore around Port Royal. In Spanish Town every single one of the nine thousand structures, including the old Jamaica Assembly building and the Governor's Residence, from which the announcement of

emancipation had been read in August 1838, were damaged. Across the east of the island, fifty thousand people lost their homes and a hundred and sixty-two lost their lives. When hundreds of power lines came down, those who had been thrown into the flood waters were electrocuted. In St Thomas parish, around Morant Bay, crops were uprooted and the topsoil washed away by a storm surge that brought the sea rushing inland.¹⁹ Thousands of people who had been barely able to subsist before the hurricane had even fewer reasons to remain and many looked to emigrate.

The following year, their options were suddenly curtailed when the United States Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (also known as the McCarran-Walter Act). The 1952 act placed new restrictions on entry, reducing the flow of West Indian migrants to a trickle. The number of visas allocated to the British West Indies as a whole was slashed to a mere eight hundred per year and no more than one hundred could be awarded to Jamaicans.²⁰ The new American restrictions channelled thousands of prospective emigrants towards Britain – the 'mother country'. The numbers arriving in the UK in the 1950s reflected the ambitions of thousands of people to better their lives, and the continued poverty that blighted the islands, but it was also a reflection of the lack of alternatives. From 1948 to 1952 the number of West Indians entering Britain each year was between 1,000 and 2,000. In 1953, the first year after the American Immigration and Nationality Act, the total reached 3,000. It then leaped to 10,000 in 1954, more than quadrupled in 1955 to 42,000 and then, for the next two years, stabilized. The 1956 total was 46,000 and 42,000 came in 1957. There was then a tailing off in 1958 and 1959, for which the respective totals were 30,000 and 22,000.²¹

The general election that returned Winston Churchill to 10 Downing Street in October 1951 resulted in a Conservative government that was every bit as uncomfortable with West Indian migration as the Labour government of Clement Attlee. One member of Churchill's Cabinet, the Marquess of Salisbury (formerly Viscount Cranbourne), warned of the risk that the arrival of large numbers of black people posed a threat to 'the racial character of the English people'.²² In 1954, during lunch at Chequers with the Governor of Jamaica, Sir Hugh Foot, Churchill expressed his concern

that if West Indian migration continued 'we would have a magpie society: that would never do'.²³ A year later Harold Macmillan reported in his diary, with some incredulity, that Churchill thought 'Keep Britain White' might make an appropriate slogan with which to fight the upcoming election.²⁴ In the aftermath of the Second World War such appeals to racial sentiment were widely regarded as unacceptable.

In the early 1950s, Churchill asked government officials in various departments to devise mechanisms by which West Indians might be kept out of the country, contrary to the rights of entry and residence they enjoyed under the 1948 Nationality Act. The challenge was to draft legislation that specifically targeted non-white immigrants while not appearing to be motivated by racial considerations. Any new law that was overtly racial risked a backlash from sections of the press and public and would damage Britain's standing in the world. Most importantly, such legislation would cause deep resentment among the nations of the multi-racial and then still fledgling British Commonwealth.²⁵ In 1955 Churchill's government considered introducing a five-year limit on the right of settlement to non-white immigrants from the new Commonwealth but thought better of it at the last minute. The legally simpler option of a blanket withdrawal of the rights of entry and residence bequeathed to all Commonwealth citizens under the 1948 Nationality Act would have antagonized the governments of the old dominions at the very moment that Britain wanted to draw those new nations closer to her, rather than push them further away.

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 the black settlers represented a social problem. Five internal investigative studies were launched in the 1950s, by both Labour and Conservative politicians, all of which set out to delineate and define 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 established to discover if the arrival of European Voluntary Workers from the Displaced

Persons camps of post-war Europe might pose similar threats to the social fabric of the nation. The final investigation, set up by the Cabinet in December 1953, was carried out by the Working Party on Coloured People Seeking Employment in The United Kingdom. Within the working party were representatives from the Home Office, the Colonial Office, the Commonwealth Relations Office, the Ministry of Labour and National Service, the Scottish Home Department, the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, and the National Assistance Board. Its report of 17 December 1953 makes for shocking reading today. It suggested that 'coloured workers' struggled to find employment because of their 'irresponsibility, quarrelsomeness and lack of discipline' and stated that black men were 'slow mentally' and in general 'not up to the standards required by British employers'.²⁶ These claims were made despite the fact that thousands of West Indians were already working in Britain and several major British employers were actively recruiting workers from the West Indies. By 1956, London Transport had begun recruitment in Jamaica and Barbados. British Rail was advertising in the Barbados Labour Office. The British Hotels and Restaurant Association was also in the West Indies seeking to attract new workers and the National Health Service was appealing for West Indian women to come to Britain and train as nurses. Enoch Powell, who was Minister of Health between 1960 and 1963, was among those involved in that recruitment campaign. Cheaper and faster travel, by sea and increasingly by air, was lowering the cost of immigration. British firms including the National Health Service and London Transport were happy to pay to transport new migrants and recoup the money once they began work.

Yet in the same years the language of immigration in Britain was slowly shifting to reflect the changing mood. Whereas migrants from Europe had in the immediate post-war years been described as people full of 'the spirit and stuff of which we can make Britons' and people who would be 'of great benefit to our stock', black men from the colonies were said to be 'unreliable and lazy' and regarded as part of an 'immigration problem'.²⁷ These terms and other coded phrases became a means through which the racially motivated hostility towards black people could be publicly discussed in ways that did not highlight race or skin colour.²⁸ By the 1970s

the words 'immigrant' and 'coloured' were being used almost interchangeably, even though only one in three immigrants entering Britain came from the new Commonwealth.²⁹ British sociologist Sheila Patterson undertook a study of West Indian migrants in Brixton during the 1950s. Asking white residents to describe the traits that differentiated them from the West Indian migrants, some complained of their supposed 'primitiveness, savagery, violence, sexuality, general lack of control, sloth, irresponsibility – all these are part of the image'.³⁰ These terms and stereotypes that by the 1950s were firmly and resolutely associated with black people living in Britain had their roots in the racial theories that had been born out of the slavery of the eighteenth century and the imperialism of the nineteenth.

Britain's great post-war imperial dilemma was also largely a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the post-war governments fretted about the arrival of West Indian immigrants they also looked on in dismay as the empire built by their Georgian and Victorian forebears began to collapse. Government opposition to the immigration of black Commonwealth citizens was profoundly at odds with the mood of universalism and anti-racialism in which the multi-racial Commonwealth had been born. Those in government who favoured imposing immigration controls specifically targeting non-white migrants understood that such laws risked damaging the Commonwealth and would inevitably give succour to the Pan-Africanist and independence movements in the West Indies and Africa. The possibility of drafting legislation that drew a distinction between the white British subjects of the 'old dominions' and the black citizens of the 'new commonwealth', which included Africa, the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, was considered, but all governments understood that such a move would have been seen as a blatant attempt to keep black people out. Such a racially specific immigration act would have been a de facto admission that the old imperial claims of universal equality and freely given British nationality, irrespective of race, were a charade. Post-war British governments therefore walked the tightrope between damaging the Commonwealth project and their general opposition to non-white migration into Britain. Speaking some years later, Sir David Hunt, Winston Churchill's Private Secretary, paraphrased the dilemma.

'The minute we said we've got to keep these black chaps out, the whole Commonwealth lark would have blown up.'³¹

The post-war governments were also wary of introducing racially targeted immigration control as they feared a backlash from the sections of the British public who since the war had set their minds against all forms of racial prejudice and welcomed the increasing diversity of their country. Opinion polls on racial attitudes were not conducted until after the Notting Hill riots in 1958, by which time there had already been ten years of official discouragement of immigration and vilification of non-white migrants from the non-white commonwealth.³² The trajectory of racism in Britain in the post-war years is therefore difficult to ascertain. Sheila Patterson, the author of the sociological study *Dark Strangers*, found that while many white people in Brixton had fixed and negative views of their black neighbours, these prejudiced opinions were not universal.

The common view, which is reflected in the memories of some West Indian migrants from the era, was that the country was split three ways. In his book *The Colour Problem* Anthony Richmond argued that one-third of the population were 'Extremely prejudiced people' who 'strongly resist the idea of having any degree of contact or communication with coloured people. They object vehemently to mixed marriages, but are almost as strongly opposed to having coloured people in their homes, or to working with them in a factory or office. In fact they are generally of the opinion that coloured people should not be allowed in Britain at all.'³³ Jamaican-born Sam King, who served in Britain with the RAF during the Second World War, came back on the *Empire Windrush* and, in 1983, became the first black mayor of the London borough of Southwark, agreed. He defined Anthony Richmond's 'Extremely prejudiced' proportion of the population as the 'third of people in Britain [who] still had imperialist ideas' and felt that 'People from the colonies should be planting bananas and chocolate and whatever it is.' The middle third King regarded as being mildly hostile to black migration and the final third, he thought of as 'just nice, ordinary people' who did not hold racist views.³⁴

That final third are often forgotten in our telling of the dispiriting story of the rise of British racism in the 1950s and 1960s, but

opposition came from within Britain as well as from without, from white people as well as from black and brown people. Millions of Britons opposed racism, and campaigned against apartheid in South Africa and white-only rule in Rhodesia; they and their votes mattered. It was also likely that many millions of white Britons in the period struggled to reconcile the racial hierarchies and unquestioned white supremacy of the age of empire with which they had been brought up, with the post-war view that racism and racial intolerance were socially unacceptable. Anthony Richmond noted that 'One remarkable fact which emerges from almost all studies of prejudice in Britain is that most people think others more prejudiced than themselves. In so far as their behaviour is largely determined by what they believe to be the expectations of others, discriminatory practices consequent upon prejudices are nearly always attributed to a need for deference to the views of others.'³⁵ Richmond believed that 'a judicious educational campaign will have little influence on the minority who are severely prejudiced, but could make considerable headway with others. At the present time landlords refuse accommodation because of what their husbands or the neighbours might think; employers refuse accommodation to coloured workers because of what their white employees might say and do; hotel and restaurant managers worry what their clients will think if they admit Negroes; and people make derogatory remarks about coloured people because it seems the thing to do'.³⁶ There was unquestionably a paradox. Why, asked another British social scientist, were 'coloured people so often . . . shabbily treated when the vast majority of individual Britons are favourably disposed towards them?'³⁷

The view from the other side of the 'colour problem' was little examined by sociologists or journalists. The word repeatedly used in the memoirs of the West Indian and African migrants who came to Britain in the post-war decades is 'disappointed'. They were disappointed that the nation they had been told was their 'mother country' treated them so badly, disappointed that skills and talents which the nation had found useful during the war years were disregarded in peacetime and they were ushered into low status or menial jobs. They were deeply disappointed and wounded when they discovered how difficult it was to fulfil the most basic human need and

find somewhere to live. Thousands of post-war black migrants were consigned to the poorest parts of Britain's cities and there left prey to predatory landlords such as West London's infamous Peter Rachman. The migrants would have felt an even deeper sense of disappointment had they known the help that was offered to the European Voluntary Workers and denied to them, and that behind closed doors successive governments had plotted to portray them as indolent, immoral and backward. Many felt they been lied to, not just by prospective employers who had actively recruited in the West Indies, but by the British Empire.

The issue that continued to cause the deepest ruptures in Britain in the post-war era, as it had done during the war years, was inter-racial relationships and marriages. Many who regarded themselves as not racist or even anti-racist were opposed to inter-racial relations. Yet, again, there was more tolerance than we might imagine today. The British social scientist Michael Banton, who in the late 1950s was studying social attitudes towards black migrants in Britain, conducted a series of sample interviews which formed part of the research behind his 1959 book *White and Coloured: The Behaviour of British People Towards Coloured Immigrants*. His research revealed that many Britons were largely relaxed about the immigration of non-white people. 76 per cent of his sample agreed with the statement 'Coloured people are just as good as us when they have the same training and opportunities', 68 per cent agreed with 'A lot of the coloured people here are very clever' and 67 per cent agreed with, 'If we all behaved in a more Christian way there would not be any colour problem.'³⁸ Banton regarded 'Responses to the statement disapproving of intermarriage' as being 'of particular interest.' He reported that when presented with the statement 'It would be a good thing if people of different races mixed with one another more', 62 per cent of his interviewees approved. Those in favour of mixed marriages made comments such as 'How can anyone stop them if they love each other?', or 'If there's one way of breaking down the colour bar it's through marriage', while 'Those who argued against intermarriage confined themselves to stating what they felt – "it's not right", "looks peculiar", "not natural" ', etc.'

Some people, Banton discovered, still subscribed to the pseudo-scientific ideas that had emerged from the racial eugenics of the early twentieth century, and which suggested that mixed-race children were mentally deficient or prone to other congenital defects. Banton noted that 'When people are asked their views about intermarriage in general, and are not considering a concrete problem posed by a member of their own family, they are apt to reply that they object to intermarriage "because of the children" . . . people believe that the children of such unions are biologically handicapped. The notion that the children of racially mixed marriages inherit the worst features of both races still lingers.'³⁹ One of Banton's interviewees remarked, 'Everything about the colour bar comes back to this – the children suffer'. Another said 'It's hard luck on the children being half-castes.' Mixed-race children were seen as a social problem in other ways. They were regarded by some as being neither one thing nor another; as Banton wrote, 'Mixed-blood populations often are in a precarious position; born in poverty and raised among the disinherited, they are ill-prepared for the difficult role they have to play.'⁴⁰

The range of opinion on inter-racial relationships that Banton's research exposed was reflected in a 1958 episode of *People in Trouble*, a topical news discussion programme. The programme-makers unthinkingly categorized inter-racial marriage as a social problem in need of journalistic exploration, and by the very nature of the programme they labelled those in mixed marriages or the products of mixed marriages as 'people in trouble'. Yet the guests they brought together to speak on the subject covered a broad range of opinion and experience. They included a very happily married inter-racial couple and their mixed-race infant son; a privately educated mixed-race half-Nigerian British army officer; and a white British woman unhappily estranged from her apparently abusive Nigerian husband. That Nigerians featured in two of the interviews was testament to the increase in immigration from Africa, as well as the West Indies.

In addition to the 'people in trouble', the programme included interviews with two political figures, who topped and tailed the show, as per the established format. The first was James Wentworth Day, then a prospective parliamentary candidate for the Conservatives. The second was Lord Altrincham, the historian and journalist

John Grigg, who later renounced his title and became a key figure in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Having interviewed the blissfully content mixed-race family, host Daniel Farson turned to the camera and asserted that 'Many widely travelled and intelligent people in this country would be against mixed marriages'. He then introduced Wentworth Day, describing him as a man who had worked as 'an advisor to the Egyptian government and the Sudan, so you know what you are talking about.' To which Wentworth Day responded, 'Well I've been there and seen them in their own home surroundings. And as a parliamentary candidate I've been into a good many working class houses . . . where there have been many mixed marriages and I've seen the children; and my view is this. That no first class nation can afford to produce a race of mongrels. Now that is what we're doing. Sooner or later that's going to come back on the children. Those children are unfair hostages to the future; it's unfair on the children; it's unfair on the nation. It's one of the reasons why France is a third class nation today. Too much mixed blood. Look at the other angle: the black man, and I refuse this humbug of talking about the "coloured" man; he's black and we're white — has a different set of standards, morals, values and principles. In many cases their grandfathers were eating each other! The lion [sic] doesn't change his spots in all that time!'

After being diverted into general discussion of the supposed character failings of black people, Farson eventually brought Wentworth Day back to the subject of mixed marriages. 'Are you implying' he asked 'that a half-caste is in any way mentally deficient?'

WENTWORTH DAY: Definitely.

FARSON: You've nothing to prove this at all!

WENTWORTH DAY: That unfortunate child is born with an inferiority complex; if it isn't born with it it grows up with it.

FARSON: You can't possibly say that it's 'born' with an inferiority complex. That's something that we instil into it later.

WENTWORTH DAY: We may instil it and also, the pure black people may do it themselves because they have an instinctive contempt you know for what they call 'white trash'.

FARSON: But if conditions were different; there was not this social prejudice, such as you have, and there were not the practical

difficulties, then if two people were in love then wouldn't you recommend them to get married?

WENTWORTH DAY: Love is a very curious thing; it depends on how you define it. I think a lot of these mixed marriages are caused purely by downright sex. Or sloppy sentimentality.

FARSON: Have you got a daughter yourself?

WENTWORTH DAY: I have a daughter who is young, charming, intelligent, with taste and discrimination.

FARSON: Well what would you feel if she said she was going to marry a coloured man?

WENTWORTH DAY: I should strongly advise her against it. I should give her all the practical reasons why not. I should ask her if she wanted to wake up in the morning and see a coffee-coloured little imp on the pillow beside her, calling her mummy. If she did marry him I should be bitterly disappointed.

After this extraordinary exchange there followed an interview with Michael Savage, a rather suave and insouciant Scottish-Nigerian ex-public schoolboy. An officer in the British army, Savage explained, in his upper-class Scottish accent, that he had not 'suffered very much' from racial prejudice. When asked by Farson if he would 'consider marrying a white girl', he responded without hesitation, 'If I wanted to marry a white girl I should marry a white girl.'

The final interview was no less remarkable than that with Wentworth Day. In 1958, Lord Altrincham was the editor of the *National and English Review*, and famous in Britain for having recently criticized the Queen's advisers and speech writers, whom he accused of writing speeches that left the monarch sounding like 'a priggish schoolgirl, captain of the hockey team, a prefect, and a recent candidate for Confirmation'.⁴¹ Farson understatedly introduced the controversial peer as 'Someone with strong views on many subjects, including the colour problem' and who was 'completely in favour of mixed marriages, in spite of all the obvious disadvantages'. The interview continued:

LORD ALTRINCHAM: I'm sure that I would never be prejudiced on grounds of colour when it came to marrying, I can't imagine being prejudiced on that ground, it seems to me quite ridiculous that anybody should be.

FARSON: But you might not be but perhaps your friends would and your neighbours, and people who would influence your children?

LORD ALTRINCHAM: That's the whole trouble you see, it's this social atmosphere against mixed marriages which creates the problem. It's because people have got a – a complete bugbear in their minds, a completely unreal idea that mixed marriages are bad that they create a climate in which it is difficult for children of mixed parentage but if there weren't the atmosphere then it would be perfectly normal, just like people with fair hair and dark hair intermarrying.

FARSON: But at the moment this atmosphere is so strong one would hesitate to recommend a mixed marriage even to two people who are in love.

LORD ALTRINCHAM: Well if they're really in love they won't need to have any recommendation, they'll actually do it. And the more people who do it the quicker this beastly atmosphere will be removed.

FARSON: Well how do you think we can help remove it?

LORD ALTRINCHAM: Well I think to just those of us who believe in it to say so as often as possible and those of us who fall in love with coloured people get married as quickly as possible.

FARSON: Now do you think that this atmosphere will change in fifty years, or a hundred years?

LORD ALTRINCHAM: Oh certainly, certainly, I think it is changing now, I think there's certainly a very different atmosphere now from say, before the war, what I remember. And I'm sure in the next fifty years it will have changed dramatically, in fact it will be quite normal. The idea of pure race is nonsense; there isn't such a thing as pure race. We're all the result of mixed marriage in the past and that's why the human race is fairly exciting and fairly interesting.

Farson then wrapped the programme up, characterizing Lord Altrincham's support for inter-racial marriages as one of the two 'extreme points of view' that the programme had aired. 'One has to face the fact', he solemnly concluded, 'that there is this great social prejudice and all the practical difficulties; in fact I cannot honestly say that I

am really in favour of mixed marriages but that is because things are as they are and I can only hope that they will change.' At this the screen faded to black and the credits rolled.

That the inter-racial couple and the mixed-race army officer featured in *People in Trouble* reported having encountered very little racial prejudice may, perhaps, have been an effort on their part to make the best of a difficult situation, but they may well have been honestly reporting their genuine experiences, which would concur with Michael Banton's findings that 62 per cent of Britons in the mid-1950s were generally comfortable with the idea of racial mixing – or at least said they were when asked by a researcher. There were certainly many people who were not just comfortable with, but actively in favour of, inter-racial marriages, as Michael Banton's later work suggested. Yet there was also operating in post-war Britain what he called a 'colour scale' through which individuals were ranked not just by their race and skin colour, but also by their socio-economic status.⁴² The better off and better educated were, to some extent, insulated from the worst aspects of British racism. But by the late 1950s there were a small number of Britons who were so irreconcilably opposed to racial mixing that the mere sight of mixed-race couples was enough to rouse them to violence.

In 1958, violence broke out in Nottingham and later in the Notting Hill area of London. The disturbances were called riots, but were in reality attacks launched against black people and their homes by white mobs. As is the case with all mass social disturbances, there were multiple causes, and the 'riots' of 1958 have to be seen within the context of the post-war economic downturn, the tradition of inner-city gang violence and the post-war Teddy boy phenomenon.⁴³ However, one of the sparks for the violence was a strong antipathy among a small number of young white working-class men to inter-racial relationships. In this respect, the 1958 'riots' were not dissimilar to some of the disturbances of 1919.

In Nottingham, the trouble began when white drinkers objected to a black man and a white woman talking together in a bar in the St Ann's area. In only a few hours, a thousand white men were involved in attacks on West Indians, and eight people were hospitalized. When,

a week later, a mob of young white men gathered again in Nottingham, intent on inciting further violence, they were disappointed to discover no black people on the streets. After unsuccessfully attempting to break into a lodging house in which black people were thought to live the mob turned against itself. In the aftermath, one regional bus company began offering tours of the parts of the city in which the fighting had taken place, forcing the Lord Mayor of Nottingham to make an appeal for people not to go to the area 'for sightseeing purposes'.

One week later, in Notting Hill, four hundred mainly young, working-class white men carrying improvised weapons launched two successive nights of attacks on local black people and their homes. They were at first unopposed but by the third and fourth nights black residents of Notting Hill, some of whom were former servicemen, had organized and armed themselves. They defended their community vigorously. It was at this point that the police finally stepped in to regain control. In the defence of their homes and communities the West Indians were assisted by some of their white neighbours, who resented the fact that most of the white 'rioters' were thugs and troublemakers who had flocked to Notting Hill from other parts of the capital.

There are two schools of thought about what happened in Britain in 1958. The first is that a succession of liberal post-war governments, obsessed with making a success of the multi-racial Commonwealth, sensitive to foreign opinion and uncertain about Britain's role in the world, finally caught up with a British public who, by 1958, had enough of coloured immigration. The alternative view is that in 1958, sections of the British public caught up with a political class that had never wanted mass coloured immigration and that ever since Clement Attlee had attempted to divert the *Empire Windrush* to East Africa had been attempting to discourage black migrants from coming to the country and devise legislation to refuse them entry.⁴⁴ Whichever the case, the 'riots' of 1958 were a watershed moment.

Within a week of the riots in Nottingham, and before the Notting Hill disturbances had hit the news, two Nottingham MPs used the violence as the pretext to call for immigration controls, despite the fact that black people had been the victims rather than the

perpetrators of the disturbances. One writer in the *Contemporary Review* argued that the underlying cause of the riots had been the presence of black immigrants. In this perverse reading of events, proximity to members of a 'lesser race' had triggered a moral decline among white working-class Londoners that had inspired them to attack their black neighbours.⁴⁵ In the weeks after Notting Hill, small groups of backbench MPs from both major parties felt emboldened enough to demand new immigration controls and link the black populations to crime. The Conservative Martin Lindsey warned of the damage that would be done to the national character if Britain were allowed to become a 'multiracial' society.⁴⁶ Norman Manley, the Prime Minister of Jamaica, who alongside his brother Roy had served with the British army on the Western Front during the First World War, travelled to Britain to assess the situation in the aftermath of the riots. While walking the affected area he was, at one point, moved on by police officers after a gang of white youths gathered nearby. Manley defiantly rejected calls being made at the time for a moratorium on passports being issued to West Indian migrants who were planning to travel to Britain and spoke to a large crowd of black Londoners, urging them to stand up for their rights.

But even some of those in Westminster and Fleet Street who understood that these 'race riots' had in fact been thuggish attacks on black people by white gangs went along with the debates about the 'social problems' and 'economic difficulties' that were said to arise from black migration. British subjects who travelled to their imperial mother country on British passports, often at the invitation of British companies, were cast by parts of the press and political class as aliens who, under the right circumstances, might be 'repatriated', a demand that was echoed by the mobs that had terrorized black people on the streets of Nottingham, shouting 'go home' and 'go back to your own country'.⁴⁷ Significantly, a poll conducted by Gallup in the summer of 1961 discovered that 67 per cent of the population supported restrictions on immigration from the new Commonwealth. Only 21 per cent of respondents supported a continuation of the liberal arrangements that existed under the 1948 Nationality Act.

The next year, the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act determined that Commonwealth citizens carrying passports that were

not issued directly by the UK government, but rather by a British colonial government or governor, would be subject to immigration controls upon entering Britain. The act also placed restrictions on the number of black people from the new Commonwealth permitted to enter the country each year. The Labour Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, decried the act as 'cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation'.⁴⁸ It was also pointed out in Parliament that white immigrants from the old dominions would be largely unaffected by the act, and it was suggested that if the government's genuine aim was to reduce the flow of unskilled labour from abroad then the same conditions should be applied to workers from Ireland, who were free to enter the country irrespective of their skills or qualifications. For those on the extreme right, the act did not go far enough.

In 1964, Peter Griffiths, the Conservative candidate in a by-election in Smethwick in the West Midlands, fought on the slogan 'If you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour'. From the hustings, Griffiths advocated not just an end to non-white immigration but the repatriation of those who had already arrived. He won, with a swing of over 7 per cent, and in doing so demonstrated that race and immigration were issues that could win votes. The Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, denounced Griffiths as a 'parliamentary leper' for having run such an openly racist campaign yet the effect on both major parties was considerable. Richard Crossman, Labour Minister for Housing and Local Government, wrote in his diary in 1965,

Ever since the Smethwick election 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 to come in and 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 had to out-trump the Tories by doing what they would have done and so transforming their policy into a bipartisan policy.⁴⁹

The same year, the Race Relations Act brought in measures to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race and made incitement to racial hatred a criminal offence. It is today regarded as a landmark in race relations in Britain. However, further Immigration

Acts from 1968 to 1971 removed the last remnants of the rights of entry and residence that had been awarded to Commonwealth citizens by the 1948 Nationality Act and the 1960s ended with perhaps the most infamous speech in British twentieth-century political history.

Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech has been analysed extensively, but what was perhaps most significant about it in the context of the times was that Powell did not couch his opposition to black migration behind numbers, as so many others had done. Powell asserted not that excessive levels of black and Asian people might force too rapid a change on Britain as they took time to assimilate, but that they could never assimilate, by dint of their race and skin colour. Powell directed his fury just not against the immigrants but against their children. In toxically racist language he described British-born children of West Indian origin as 'wide-grinning piccaninnies'. This was an unsubtle but precisely calibrated attack on the younger generation, the British-born children of the immigrants who Powell believed could never become British despite knowing no other homeland. 'The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England become an Englishman', he said seven months after the 'Rivers of Blood' speech. 'Time is running against us and them', he warned ominously.⁵⁰ In another speech he described skin colour as being like a 'uniform' that could not be removed.

Within a day of the 'Rivers of Blood' speech Powell was sacked from the shadow Cabinet by the Leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath, a fact that is too often overlooked but that stands as evidence of the genuine and principled opposition to racism that existed within both the Conservative and Labour Parties in the post-war period. Just as genuine was the scale of public support for immigration control to limit the numbers of new Commonwealth immigrants. Powell, now in the political wilderness, received 110,000 letters, only 2,300 of which disapproved of the 'Rivers of Blood' speech. A Gallup poll taken at the end of April 1968 reported that 74 per cent of those questioned agreed with him. On 23 April, as the House of Commons debated a second Race Relations Bill, 2,000 London dock workers downed their tools in protest at his sacking. The next day the meat porters of Smithfield market

submitted a petition containing ninety-two pages of signatures in his support.

While Powell discussed the possibility of new legislation, some of his followers embarked upon a wave of attacks against black people that those who lived through them have never forgotten. In one of the bleakest chapters in British history, homes were attacked, and there was a wave of racial assaults, some of them serious. Chillingly, wooden crosses were burnt outside the homes of black people in Britain. Martin Luther King had been murdered by a white racist in Memphis just a few months earlier, and the iconography of American racism and the KKK was in the newspapers and in people's minds.⁵¹

Powell had been characteristically precise in the language of his 'Rivers of Blood' speech and had inverted the symbolism of history by describing the black man as having the 'whip hand over the white man'. His later speeches were equally precise. Powell spoke not just of immigrants and immigration control but of the 'immigrant-descended population'. His targets were the children of the men and women who had left their homes in the West Indies and Africa in the 1940s and 50s. Powell warned on more than one occasion that even a complete halt to the immigration of non-white people into the country would not prevent the expansion of the non-white population. What was needed, he later stated, was a 'Ministry of Repatriation'. Yet by the mid-1970s 40 per cent of the black population were British-born. They had no other country to which they felt a strong bond. They also lacked the immigrants' sense of being outsiders and their willingness to accept rejection and tolerate shabby treatment. Powell called them 'the immigrant-descended population', while even those who claimed to be impartial and objective defined them using the term 'second-generation immigrants', a glaring contradiction that is commonly used today.

Between 1979 and 1989, unemployment in Britain averaged 9.1 per cent, a significant increase. Homelessness was on the rise, as was child poverty and crime. In parts of Britain's inner cities black people were accused of placing even greater strains on already over-stretched public services. They were, at the same time, one of the groups worst affected by the economic downturn; victims of

the economic crisis for which they were held partly responsible.⁵² By every social indicator — unemployment, overcrowded housing, educational attainment, criminal convictions — black people were profoundly disadvantaged.

In 1978 Margaret Thatcher, then Leader of the Opposition, gave an interview to Granada Television's *World in Action* programme, in which she spoke on the issue of immigration. The future Prime Minister stated that '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 that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in'.⁵³ A year later in early 1979 in a newspaper interview she again suggested that 'some people have felt swamped by immigrants. They've seen the whole character of their neighbourhoods change'.⁵⁴ While neighbourhoods across Britain had changed since the war for all sorts of reasons, immigration certainly being one of them, immigrants accounted for a mere 4 per cent of the British population in 1979. Yet the word 'swamped' struck home with voters and shocked some commentators. Intentionally or not it was an echo of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, redolent of when he had spoken, a decade earlier, of English people who found 'their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition' and parts of the country that had become 'alien territory'.⁵⁵ Thatcher's words were denounced by black British groups and by her political opponents, and criticized by some in her own party including Bernard Levin, a sometime supporter of hers who wrote in *The Times* that, 'If you talk and behave as though black men were some kind of virus that must be kept out of the body politic then it is the shabbiest hypocrisy to preach racial harmony at the same time'.⁵⁶

1981 began with an appalling tragedy. Thirteen young people, all of them black, died when a house in the New Cross area of London was consumed by fire. They were celebrating a birthday party. The police ruled out the possibility that the fire had been started deliberately and, when pushed by the families, dismissed suggestions

that if it was an arson attack there might have been racial motives. There was silence from the political class and a strong sense among black Londoners that the authorities were not interested in the deaths of black people. When, in March, around twenty thousand black people marched from Deptford to central London to demand a thorough investigation, sections of the press reported the predominantly peaceful march as a day of riots. When, the next month, the Metropolitan Police began an operation against violent street crime in Brixton, they entered a community that had run out of patience with official indifference, ceaseless harassment and vilification. That police operation, launched in April 1981, made use of the hated 'sus' law (section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824, which allowed police officers to stop and search anyone merely on the suspicion that they had intent to commit an offence) and was an exercise in what at the time was called 'hard policing'. The operation was undertaken by the Special Patrol Group, a unit with a terrible reputation among London's black communities. With breathtaking insensitivity that revealed the depth of racism within the force, the Metropolitan Police chose to name the operation 'Swamp 81'. Over two days, 120 plainclothes officers stopped and searched 943 people, arresting 118 on various charges. This heavy-handed operation came on top of a series of incidents that had gradually ratcheted up tensions between young black people and the police, resulting in a complete breakdown of trust, an explosion of anger and a wave of destruction.

The riots of 1981 spread beyond London to other inner-city areas in which young black people, the children of the *Windrush* generation, felt themselves marginalized and persecuted by the police. Riots broke out in Handsworth in Birmingham, Moss Side in Manchester and Toxteth in Liverpool, where deep tensions between the black population and the police had long been festering. Liverpool Chief Constable Kenneth Oxford, almost as if seeking to emphasize and highlight the historical continuities, suggested that the underlying cause of the riots was 'the problem of half-castes in Liverpool.' Mixed-race residents of the city – many of whose families had lived in Liverpool since before the First World War – were described by their own chief constable as 'the product of

liaisons between black seamen and white prostitutes in Liverpool 8 [Toxteth]'.⁵⁷

There was a terrible symmetry to the fact that the most serious and sustained of the early 1980s riots took place in the cities from which the slave-traders had set sail in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Liverpool, Bristol and London. Cities that had been enriched by the slave trade and the sugar business saw fires set and barricades erected by young people who were the distant descendants of human cargo. Not far from the flickering flames of the Bristol riots, a statue of Edward Colston, a slave-trader and member of the Royal African Company in the seventeenth century, looked on as the police were driven out of the black St Pauls district.

The riots of the early 1980s were profoundly different from the disturbances of 1919, 1948 and 1958, all of which were at various times described as 'race riots' but were mostly outbursts of violence in which white gangs targeted black people and communities. This was not the case in the 1980s. These riots have been called 'uprisings'. They were fought by young black people in response to years of systematic persecution and prejudice. They were destructive and damaging but they were understandable. While it is clear today that the riots marked the beginning of the end of one chapter, the nature of the new age that followed remains to be seen. The 1990s and the 2000s were, in many ways, better days. Survey after survey plotted the decline of racist sentiment as a younger generation emerged who had not experienced the racism of the post-war period nor been brought up to view the world in racial terms. Yet this period was the era in which the name of Stephen Lawrence was added to the long list of black Britons who have been murdered by racists.

Historians tend to be cautious when it comes to commenting on the modern age, the period through which we are currently living. For me, the period from the 1980s onwards is the one I know from personal memory as well as through historical study, which probably clouds more than it clarifies judgement. But I strongly recall that in the 1980s there was a strong sense among black people

of being under siege, and of feeling the need to fight for a place and a future in the country.

One of the ways in which black people, and their white allies, attempted to secure that future was by reclaiming their lost past. The uncovering of black British history was so important because the present was so contested. Black history became critical to the generation whom Enoch Powell could not bring himself to see as British. A history was needed to demonstrate to all that black British children, born of immigrant parents, were part of a longer story that stretched back to the Afro-Romans whose remains are only now being properly identified. It was in the 1980s that the concept of Black History Month was brought to Britain – an idea that been pioneered in the United States back in the 1920s, as 'Negro History Week'.⁵⁸ The black past had been largely buried and the task of exhumation took on real urgency during the 1980s. Unusually, history became critical to a whole community, while at the same time being highly personal to those who discovered it. To look at the portrait of Olaudah Equiano for the first time, and stare into the eyes of a black Georgian, was, for me as for many thousands of black Britons, a profound experience. To see Equiano, with his cravat and scarlet coat, was to feel the embrace of the past and of a deeper belonging. The black British history that was written in the 1980s was built on the foundations of earlier scholars like James Walvin, and was expanded by hundreds of committed volunteers; local historians, community historians and brilliant, determined, sometimes obsessive amateurs. Most worked and still work outside of academia, producing bottom-up, community-facing local history or uncovering the presence of black people in parts of the British story from which they have been expunged – the world wars, the history of seafaring, the world of entertainment and many others. It is hard to believe that without the recent decades of black history research and writing, the nation, in 2007, would have committed £20 million to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. A sum that matched, by chance, the price the nation had paid the slave owners in compensation for the loss of their human property in 1838.

The next step, I contend, is to expand the horizon, and reimagine black British history as not just a story that took place in Britain,

and not just as the story of settlement, although it matters enormously. From the sixteenth century onwards, Britain exploded like a supernova, radiating its power and influence across the world. Black people were placed at the centre of that revolution. Our history is global, transnational, triangular, and much of it is still to be written.

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