Black AND British

A short, essential history

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INTRODUCTION

When I was at school there was no Black history. None of the Black people from the past who we know about today were ever mentioned by my teachers, and my textbooks contained nothing about the role Black people have played in the story of Britain. So what I presumed was that there must not have been any Black people in British history.

It was only when I became a teenager, and was able to read grown-up history books, that I learned that there had been Black people throughout much of British history, all the way back to the Roman conquest. It was

from then onwards that I learned about slavery and about the British Empire, about Black Tudors, like the trumpeter John Blanke, and Black people like Dido Elizabeth Belle and Oludah Equiano who lived in Britain in the eighteenth century. I also learned about the Black children who lived as slaves in the houses of rich people in London, Bristol, Liverpool and other cities. I read about the enslaved people who were made to work on plantations in the West Indies and America, and learned how the sugar and cotton they grew helped make Britain rich. I discovered that there had been Black sailors at the Battle of Trafalgar and that Black soldiers had fought in the trenches of the First World War. I read about the Black pilots and navigators who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and about the people who had come to Britain on the *Windrush* in 1948 to start new lives.

A few years ago I wrote a book for grown-ups about Black British history. Ever since I finished that book, young people and their parents have been asking me to write a

book like this one. A book for younger readers. This is the book I wish I had been given to read when I was at school. I have written it so that the history of Black people in Britain can be read by everybody, and not just grown-ups. This book is an introduction. It is a place to start learning about Black British history and it will introduce you to some of the thousands of Black people who made their homes in Britain in past centuries.

One thing I was taught about in my schools was the Industrial Revolution. What I was taught is probably what you have been taught. I learned about the huge factories that were built in the North of England, and parts of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. I learned about the rich men who owned them and I was taught about the new machines they invented, like the Water Frame, the Flying Shuttle and the Spinning Jenny. I was also taught about the children who had to work in the factories that made the new products of the Industrial Age and the mills that produced the clothes everyone wore.

Two of the most important products of the Industrial Revolution were cotton cloth and cotton yarn (thread) made in the mills using the new machines. At my school I learned about how the cotton that had been picked from cotton plants was transformed into cloth and yarn. But what I was not told by my teachers, and what was not mentioned in my school textbooks or in any of the museums we visited on school trips, was where the cotton come from before it arrived in the mills.

Most of that cotton came from the Mississippi Valley, in the Deep South of the United States of America. It was grown on plantations by Africans, men and women who were enslaved. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Queen Victoria was on the throne, 1.8 million African-Americans worked growing cotton in the United States. Much of that cotton was sent on ships across the Atlantic Ocean to Britain. The ships sailed up the River Mersey and into the docks of Liverpool. From there it was sent to the thousands of mills in Lancashire in the north of England – the part of the country around

Manchester. The Black people who were enslaved in America made the Mississippi Valley one of the richest places in the world. But they also made Manchester and Lancashire Valley wealthy. The cotton mills in and around Manchester made the city so rich that it was given a nickname – Cottonopolis.

Today we remember the Industrial Revolution for the hard, difficult work of our ancestors who worked in the factories and mills. But we have forgotten the almost 1.8 million Black men and women of the American South who lived and died as slaves to grow the cotton. The enslaved people of the Deep South never set foot in Britain but they are part of British history. This is just one example of the ways in which the histories of Black people have often been missed out of the British history we learn at school.

Since I wrote the grown-up version of this book, new discoveries have been made and new Black Britons from earlier generations have been found in old documents

stored in archives. Black British history is growing. We know more with each passing year. In recent years we have learned about Jacques Francis, the enslaved Black diver who led a diving expedition that attempted to salvage items from the *Mary Rose*, Henry VIII's flagship, after it had sunk. We have also learned more about the lives of enslaved people living in Georgian Britain, thanks to a project at Glasgow University that has searched the archives to find more than 800 advertisements that were placed in British newspapers by slave owners offering rewards for the return of enslaved people who had run away. Through those advertisements we learned more about the ages, appearances, clothing and skills of enslaved Black people living in Britain more than 200 years ago.

With each passing year, Black British history is not only expanding, it is also becoming ever more personal to increasing numbers of people. Britain's population is changing. More of us than ever are members of families that include people of different skin colours and

ethnicities. Black history helps explain how national history is intertwined with our family histories. It helps us make sense of the country we are today.