

## **A BLACK KALEIDOSCOPE: BLACK WRITERS IN BRITAIN 1760-1890**

Paul Edwards & David Dabydeen (eds.), **Black writers in Britain 1760-1890** (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) Early Black Writers, series editors Edwards & Dabydeen, 240 pp. hard-back.

To say the obvious right at the outset: this is an extremely rich and tightly packed anthology, compiled by two leading scholars in the field. Their collaboration is even more interesting because of their different geographical, ethnic, and academic backgrounds, which make this mixed men's double singularly well equipped to elucidate all sides of a very complex subject. Though still comparatively young in years, David Dabydeen is Senior Lecturer in Caribbean Studies at Warwick; Paul Edwards had retired as Professor of English and African Literature at Edinburgh University shortly before his death in 1992. Even after retirement, he was still frequently found in his office in David Hume Tower, where he kept doing what he had been doing for so many years: administering large doses of home brew and intellectual inspiration to colleagues, students, and interested visitors alike.

Measured by their declared intent, the two editors have come up with a book that is more than successful: as they had put it in an earlier joint publication, they aimed to document that from a relatively early stage of their contact with English culture, black people have not only been a subject of literature in English, but have also come forward as authors. With 19 featured writers from the chosen period (presumably suggested by the material itself and not by any theoretical considerations), the evidence in favour of the contention is overwhelming. There are really even more than 19 writers, because one chapter contains selected letters and other documents written by settlers in Sierra Leone between 1791 and 1800. This section is hardly any less intriguing than the rest; and with specimens of stumbling style and gruesome grammar it provides an interesting foil to the bulk of more polished writings. Still, all remaining 18 chapters focus on the literary production of individuals as products of their individual experience; and the settlers' texts can hardly be classed as having been produced by "black writers in Britain". As for the purpose of making them accessible to a large readership, this task could safely have been left to Christopher Fyfe's volume in the same series, which is entirely devoted to that particular subject.

In the case of other pieces featured, such as the extract from Briton Hammon's narrative, or all but one of Philip Opaque's letters, I have no objection to the inclusion; I would have thought, however, that this would call for a slightly different book title. Hammon's autobiography was published in Boston, and most of Opaque's epistles were written in Cape Coast Castle. This suggests an Imperial rather than a geographical definition of the term 'Britain', and I am sure that Messrs. Edwards and Dabydeen would not want to be suspected of propagating any Imperialist ideology.

The only other criticism I have is that in their laudable eagerness to let the authors speak for themselves, the editors have foregone a chance to convey to the reader more of their own astute and valuable insights. While the introductory notes to the 19 chapters are perfect short readers' guides, the introduction to the anthology itself gives the peruser of the book rather shorter thrift than necessary. Given the extremely varied nature of the collected writings, it could be argued that a systematic interpretative survey would have called for more generalisation than warranted by the texts. Nonetheless, I would have appreciated a summary editorial analysis highlighting recurrent motifs, which need not have diminished the pleasure readers will derive from making their own observations.

Such motifs are chiefly to be found in the treatment of three themes which are closely interrelated: literacy, religion, and civilisation. As the editors point out, the fact that some blacks acquired the ability to talk, read, and even write in English was a vital factor in the liberation of all slaves, clearly recognised as such, and hence strongly resisted, by slave owners. In a Christian context, literacy also meant direct access to the source of religious authority, the Bible. The result of the emancipatory process of learning, however, was ambivalent. John Jea relates how observing the behaviour of slaveholders and other whites led him "to hate those who professed themselves christians": but this is the judgement of a man who has become a Christian preacher, and mocks his former "foolish opinion". Ukawsaw Gronniosaw tells the reader of his being scolded for cursing and swearing in English by a fellow-black, who informs him that people who do so will burn in hell. The offender is greatly frightened and grateful for the advice; he in turn gives it to his mistress, for whom he has charitable feelings, when he hears her swear. Old Ned, identified as the source of the counsel, is "tied up and whipped", while the mistress is highly amused with what Gronniosaw calls "my

simplicity". The two-edgedness may be unintentional in the righteous Jea's account, but nevertheless it exists. In Gronniosaw's case, the fun which the educated black man makes of his former lack of sophistication is clearly also a deliberate jibe against white hypocrisy, using a technique which became a staple ingredient of black literature; a good case in point is Ralph Ellison's **Invisible Man**, where it provides the backbone to the whole narrative structure.

The use of an authorial persona split between a former and a present self can also be found in other fictional and non-fictional autobiography which deals with conflicting sense of identity. Robinson Crusoe springs to mind, who wants to live in peace and pious humility, but likewise to have adventures, and be rich and powerful. Olaudah Equiano shows a similar state of mind: his mercantile spirit is shown in prose that bears a striking resemblance to Defoe's:

After I had been sailing for some time with this captain, at length I endeavoured to try my luck and commence merchant. I had but a very small capital to begin with; for a single half bit, which is equal to three pence in England, made up my whole stock. However I trusted the Lord to be with me; and at one of our trips to St. Eustatia, a Dutch island, I bought a glass tumbler with my half bit, and when I came to Montserrat I sold it for a bit, or sixpence. Luckily we made several successive trips to St. Eustatia . . . and in our next, finding my tumbler so profitable, with this one bit I bought two tumblers more; and when I came back I sold them for two bits, equal to a shilling sterling. When we went again I bought with these two bits four more of these glasses, which I sold for bits on our return to Montserrat: and in our next voyage to St. Eustatia I bought two glasses with one bit, and with the other three I bought a jug of Geneva, nearly about three pints in measure. When we came to Montserrat I sold the gin for eight bits, and the tumblers for two, so that my capital now amounted in all to a dollar, well husbanded and acquired in the space of a month or six weeks, when I blessed the Lord that I was so rich.

A Friday has turned into a Robinson: he has inherited his concerns as well as his problems, by acquiring a set of contradictory values and demands which become even more contradictory in application to his particular circumstances. Equiano initially wants money to buy his freedom, but he develops a lasting obsession with cash, the true

**object of worship in English society: Robinson manages to think of God only as long as there is no possibility for trade. Blacks are left with the task of squaring the circle, in reconciling commercial and divine commandments: ultimately, the only way is to prove that slavery is immoral because it is unprofitable, as Ottobah Cuguano suggests, who would like to see free Africans "imitate their noble British friends" to mutual advantage. J.J. Thomas and E.W. Blyden blow the trumpet of "Peace and Progress" through commerce and black colonisation, in the same breath that sounds the bugle for an attack on slavery and racism. Nobody familiar with African history could fail to perceive the persistence of the issue, and the resulting ironies.**

There would be a lot to discuss yet, but I will limit myself to mentioning one more piece in the anthology which is a particular gem. Robert Wedderburn's speech in court is a most exquisite example of black oratory, worthy of ranking with choicest specimens of Classical legal eloquence. The speaker, accused of blasphemy, puts his tongue well in his cheek before he turns into an *advocatus Dei*, spiritedly arguing for the liberty of religion.

The reader is advised to open the anthology and hear Wedderburn speaking: a black voice among many other distinctive black voices which strive for expression in a white medium, and often even with white secretarial and editorial help the real human beings behind the literary personae are often heavily disguised, but always somehow discernible in the selected texts, as varied as people, and as life itself.

**Manfred Malzahn**