



# As Good as Any Man: Scotland's Black Tommy

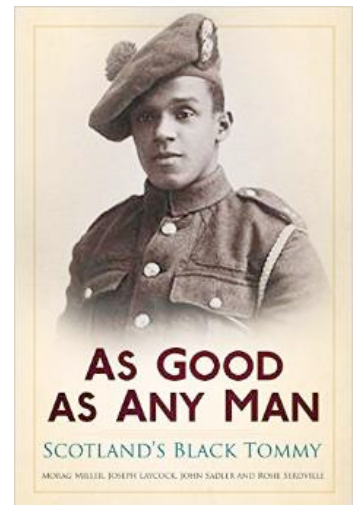
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Book Review by Marika Sherwood

As Good as Any Man: Scotland's Black Tommy by Morag Miller, Roy Laycock, John Sadler, Rosie Serdiville, is in fact mainly by Arthur Roberts, the 'Black Tommy'. The manuscript was found some years ago and edited/contextualized by these four researchers from a museum. Roberts was on the Front line from 1917 — and is an enthralling writer.

Morag Miller, Roy Laycock,

John Sadler, Rosie Serdiville, *As Good as Any Man: Scotland's Black Tommy*  
(History Press, 190pp pbk, £9.99)



## As Good as Any Man: Scotland's Black Tommy

A box containing photographs, paintings, drawings and scripts was found in the attic of a house in Glasgow in 2004. Thankfully one of the new owners was a university student who recognized the possible value of the contents. So the box went to the King's Own Scottish Borderers Association Museum at Berwick-upon-Tweed, where researchers immediately began the work which is now this book.

### Who was Arthur Roberts?

The 'Black Tommy' was Bristol-born Arthur Roberts, whose 'Afro- Caribbean father worked as a ship's steward'. His mother, Laura Dann, was a 'West Country lass'. At an unknown date the family moved to Glasgow where Arthur went to school and then worked as a marine engineer until he volunteered for the army in 1917, aged 20. The materials in the box are all about his first year in the army, initially in the King's Own Scottish Borderers, then the 2nd Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers.

The daily diary he kept formed the basis for the account Roberts then wrote of that year. This book is a compilation of background, including historical materials, and explanations by the researchers and wonderful

excerpts from both the diary and the detailed, almost mesmerizing accounts, as well as copies of some of his photographs and paintings. We do not know why he only described his first army year. Of course, it is possible that he did not keep his accounts of his other years – he was demobbed in December 1919. But why would he have destroyed these? Or not written them?

As the researchers comment, Roberts says virtually nothing about his experiences as a Black man. Even if he was fairly light-skinned – which the portraits show he was – he must have encountered racism in the many forms then practiced, including by the military. Sadly, as he died in 1982, we cannot ask him. Nor are there any clues in the often very detailed descriptions of daily life in and out of the trenches. Is it possible that he tried to get his book published, including his photographs and paintings, but no publisher accepted a book by a Black man? As in his account he often addresses ‘dear reader’, this might be correct. It should certainly have been published!

So if you want an enthralling description of military life on the Western Front, read this brief book. It will acquaint you with the tiredness / exhaustion on the marches and the boredom when behind the

Lines; regular bombardments when on the Front Line, sometimes with bodies literally ‘littering’ the trenches making it difficult to walk along without stepping on them; the frequent lack of suitable clothing, of food, of dry places to sleep; the regular daily handouts of rum and the issue of cigarettes; dances and concerts to entertain the men awaiting move to the Front Line; the importance of letters and parcels from home; how fortnightly pay (often late) is spent in local cinemas, cafes, etc. when you awaiting being moved to the Front Line; then there are the gas attacks!

Roberts also mentions some friends in his Battalion. There are many comments by Roberts on the social class differences – e.g. officers have servants, and travel in coaches while the men in the ranks are piled into ‘animal trucks’ when being moved by rail. In the trenches, there are special ‘dug-outs’ for them.

In his description of his demobilization, Roberts writes, ‘Best of all I was now as good as any officer regimental sergeant major, or in fact any non-com that ever wore the king’s uniform’. Does this refer to social class as well as racial issues?

The book ends with a summary of the little the researchers managed to find about Roberts’ post-war life – the completion of his apprenticeship, his wife, his sister, his father who had returned to the West Indies, the Care Home in which he died on 15 January 1982.

Roberts was a gifted writer, painter, photographer. The researchers do him justice. Do read this book, even though it tells us nothing about how a Black soldier was treated by the Scottish military.